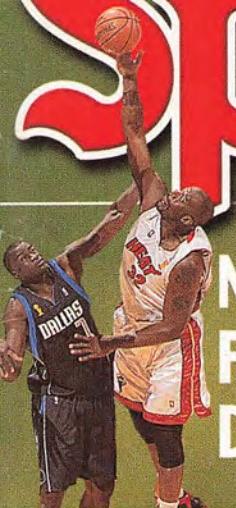


How to BECOME AN AGENT without really lyin'

SEE A DIFFERENT GAME

Sporting News



NBA • NHL
Finals coverage
Draft preview

15 clues to
decoding
the N.L. WEST

THE EDUCATION OF VINCE YOUNG

www.sportingnews.com

June 30, 2006

The finer points of
celebrating
with cheap champagne



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THIS WEEK

> NBA

10 A tale of two playgrounds

One shaped Heat star Dwyane Wade; the other molded Mavs coach Avery Johnson. By Sean Deveney. Plus, a look at Patrick O'Bryant, a big draft prospect from Bradley.

16 It's the big time!

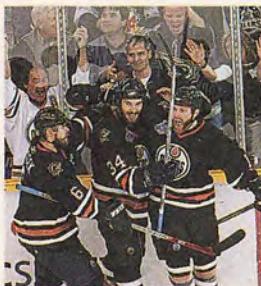
Easy money! Glamour! Free tickets! Travel! It's all there for the taking when you become an NBA agent. Uh, not so fast. By Sean Deveney



> NHL

24 No bit parts

An unheralded line allowed the Oilers to avoid an early exit in the Stanley Cup finals. Plus, a look at the NHL draft and the league's free-agent signing period.



> BASEBALL

26 Decoding the N.L. West

Get a clue! Actually, get 14 of 'em—and one more to get you started on next season—to decipher 2006's most misunderstood division. By Bob Hille

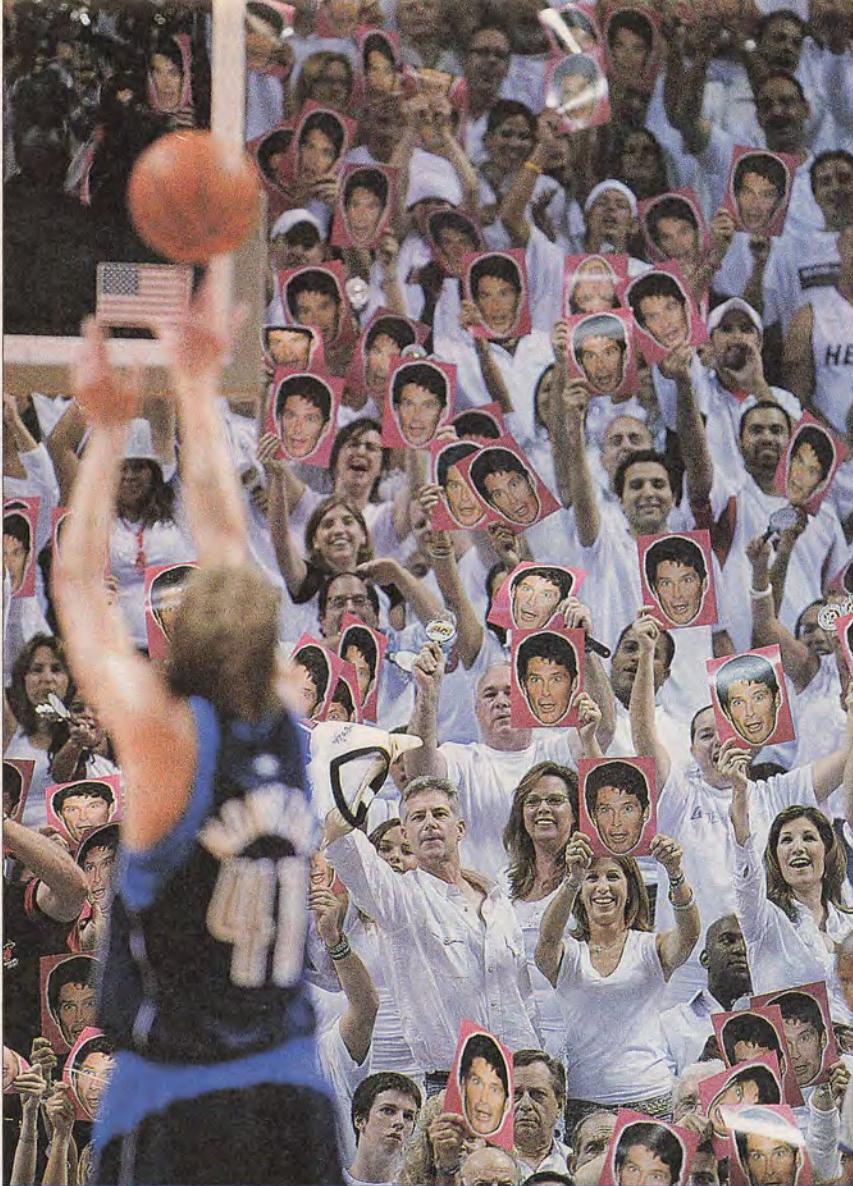
COVER STORY > NFL

28 Pocket change

Vince Young slashed, sprinted and spun his way to a pile of honors at Texas. But to excel in the NFL, he needs to know the pro quarterback ABCs. By Matt Crossman

COVER: VINCE YOUNG BY ALBERT DICKSON / SN

Send your editorial comments or complaints to Senior VP/Editorial Director John Rawlings at jrawlings@sportingnews.com.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

10

The Heat got back into The Finals in Miami—no doubt inspired by the unrelenting Hassel-hoffing of the Mavs' Dirk Nowitzki.

2 KNOW IT ALL

- 2 **To Know List** Ben Roethlisberger's injuries probably won't cost him any playing time.
- 4 **On deck** With the No. 1 pick in the NBA draft, the Raptors select ... well, you'll just have to watch.
- 5 **My Turn** Sean Deveney hits the showers—with a bottle of bubbly in hand.
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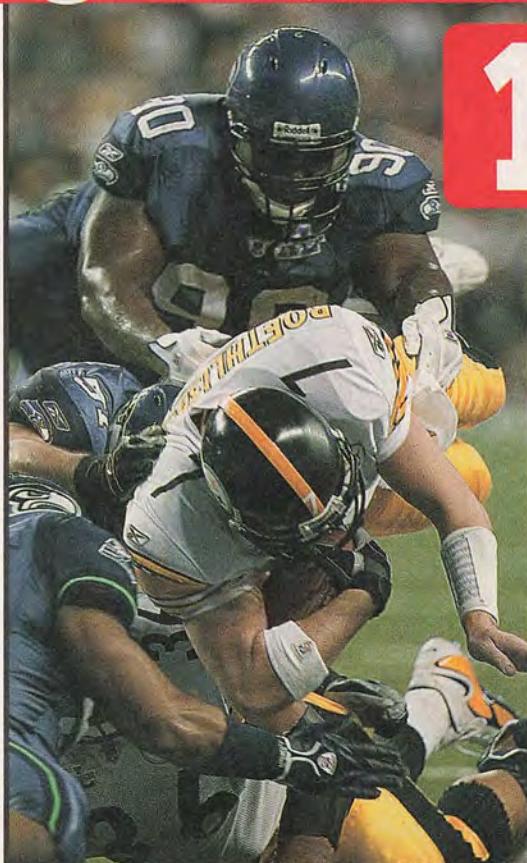
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KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL

TO KNOW LIST

8 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week



JAY DROWNS / SN
Big Ben never has minded putting his body at risk on the field. Will that change?

1

THE MAIN EVENT

Ben out of shape

The champs can't win big without Big Ben.

Since becoming their starting quarterback in

Week 3 of his rookie season, Ben Roethlisberger, who suffered multiple face and head injuries in a June 12 motorcycle crash, is 27-4, has set an NFL record for most consecutive victories to begin a career and has become the youngest starting QB to win a Super Bowl.

The good news: Doctors have told Roethlisberger he is likely to be ready to play in two months. He didn't suffer any injuries to his knees or shoulders, which means there is unlikely to be any physical limitations on his ability to run and throw—elements Roethlisberger does in combination as well as any quarterback in the NFL. Though he had his jaw broken in four places, Roethlisberger did not have it wired shut, which has allowed him to start eating soft foods such as yogurt, pudding and mashed potatoes already. That will help prevent him from significant weight loss during his recovery. What's more, Roethlisberger is not likely to have any setbacks in his mental preparation. At the time of his accident, he had completed the team's voluntary workouts and offseason coaching sessions.

Still, there are concerns. Because Roethlisberger broke his nose and an orbital bone in addition to suffering a concussion, the Steelers are worried about hits to his head, especially early in the season. Roethlisberger likes to run outside the pocket to create time and space for his receivers, and he has never been afraid to dive forward for extra yards. If Roethlisberger is tentative now, that will take away his ability to create big plays on the run, an element of the Steelers' offense that was so valuable in the playoffs.

Roethlisberger is expected to be ready to join his teammates for the start of training camp July 30, but he will not be involved in any early contact drills and probably won't be allowed to play until the third preseason game. Barring setbacks, he will be ready to start the season opener against the Dolphins.

Charlie Batch, a nine-year veteran, has replaced Tommy Maddox as the top backup. Like Roethlisberger, he is mobile and can make plays on the run. But without Roethlisberger, the Steelers are merely a good team. With him, they are a great team. —Gerry Dulac



PHILIP G. RAVELY / THE PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW / AP

3

2

OTHER RISK TAKERS

Who says it's the No Fun League?



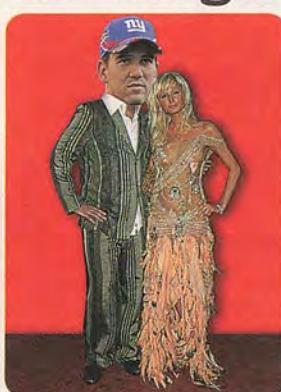
Jason Taylor is an avid sailor. Hiya, dolphins!



Brian Urlacher avoided any real owies in an NWA outing.



J.P. Losman stretches out his arm while water-skiing.



Eli Manning clubbed with Paris Hilton. Dangerous!



Grant Wistrom loves to surf ... the waves, not the Net.

NEWS YOU CAN'T USE

Man with hard-to-place accent says this is year soccer takes hold in America >> Cubs give up unprecedeted 'own goal' in latest loss >> NBA's Stern

4

IN THE SPOTLIGHT: FSN FINAL SCORE

Playing it straight

Aaron Sorkin's *SportsNight* comes to life—sort of—on July 3 when FOX Sports Net starts taking on ESPN's *SportsCenter* with the premiere of its nightly news show, *FSN Final Score*.

FSN promises a highlights-driven program with a rotating group of anchors (remember Van Earl Wright?). And like Sorkin's brilliant but short-lived show about a fictional sports network battling the big boys from Bristol, *Final Score* plans to place the emphasis on the news. In other words, it'll be like *SportsCenter* used to be before it morphed into *Disney-ABC-ESPN BrandingCenter*.

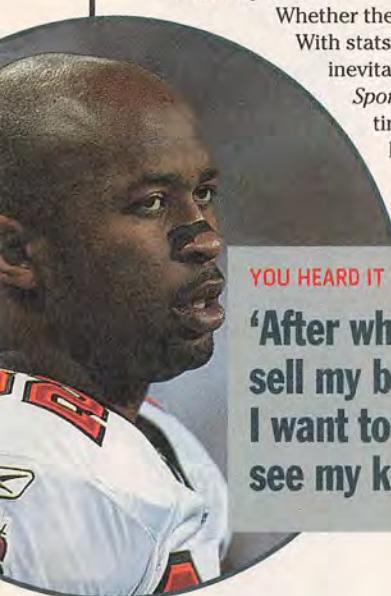
It's the first time *SportsCenter* will be facing competition since FOX's last attempt at a national show, *The FOX National Sports Report*, was bagged in February 2002.

Whether the no-nonsense approach will work is questionable.

With stats and highlights readily available on the web, it was inevitable that sports news shows would change, and *SportsCenter* has done so by providing lots of on-air time for its array of pundits and prognosticators. But FSN's stable of reporters and play-by-play talent around the nation will position the show to cover anything that moves. —Seth Elkin

YOU HEARD IT HERE

'After what happened to Ben, I'm going to sell my bikes. I've got way too much to lose. I want to be around to end my career and see my kids grow up.' —Buccaneers running back Michael Pittman



RADIO

6**Rice, Barber get Sirius**

Jerry Rice spent his NFL career catching everything that came his way, but in his newest career the only things he's fielding are phone calls. Rice will be joining co-host Adam Schein for *Afternoon Blitz* (3-7 p.m. ET) three times a week throughout the year on Sirius Satellite's NFL Radio.

Don't expect Rice to pull any punches with current players. In his debut last week, he called out Ben Roethlisberger and questioned Deion Branch's loyalty because of his contract holdout.

Rice isn't the only player making a second career in the Sirius Satellite family. Tiki Barber—already part of a show on NFL Radio with twin brother Ronde—launched *Tiki Barber's National Sweep* (Thursdays, 7-9 p.m. ET) last month on Sirius Stars. Barber will cover it all during the offseason, talking about everything from politics to entertainment. —Chris Littmann

ED ANDRIESKI / AP
RiceKRISTIE BULL / AP
Barber**7**

QUICK CLICKS

If you dig all minor leagues ...

You know all about Yankees-Red Sox, but who've you got coming out of the Pacific Conference next month in the National Indoor Football League playoffs—the Billings Outlaws or the Rapid City Flying Aces?

Hundreds of athletes in minor leagues would be out there toiling in obscurity but for the efforts of [OurSportsCentral.com](#). The web's best minor league resource covers basketball, baseball, hockey, soccer and indoor football, including podcasts, links to team and league sites, newspaper coverage and free radio broadcasts.

For what it's worth, the smart money in the NIFL is on Billings—the Outlaws beat Rapid City, 44-36, on May 27. —S.E.

8**... or just baseball's**

If you can't make it out to a park to experience the atmosphere of the minor leagues firsthand, you're missing a treat. But you can tune in to a couple dozen free radio broadcasts a day at [MinorLeagueBaseball.com](#). Get the audio by using Windows Media Player. The site also has a package of 500 live TV broadcasts you can watch online for \$19.95. —S.E.

We love baseball.

It's a pretty big-league site.

REMEMBER THE NAMES

Brian Elfus and Michael Siegel

They are agents with a modest practice—Randy Livingston is their top client. With help from Livingston, an LSU alum with 199 games of NBA experience in 10 seasons of bouncing around the league, the pair signed LSU forward Tyrus Thomas and bucked the trend of lottery picks' landing with the most powerful agencies. Livingston now works closely with Thomas. "They work out every day," Elfus says. "Randy talks to him about the league, about what he will have to deal with."

Thomas' stock hasn't been hurt by his signing with a fledgling agency—the Bulls might draft him second overall. —Sean Devaney

ON DECK

>>>> The week ahead in sports

THIS I GOTTA SEE SAT 24

Good thing we Americans are such unabashed front-runners—the second round of the World Cup gets kickin' at 10:30 a.m. on ABC. Did I mention I'm a dyed-in-the-wool Brazil fan?

All times Eastern



FRANKA BRUNN / AP



JASPER JUINEN / AP

Brazilian fans are awesome, but we're pretty nuts, too ... for whoever's winning.

SUN 25

Still feeling that U.S. Open hangover? A little hair of the dog is what you need—drink in the final round of the Booz Allen Classic (3 p.m., ABC).

Astros at White Sox

(8 p.m., ESPN). Programming execs are leaning toward a Stump the Schwab marathon as the backup plan in case the 'Stros fail (again) to show up.

MON 26

If you're lucky, tonight's the winner-take-all rubber match in the best-of-three championship round of the College World Series (7 p.m., ESPN). If not, well, you could always try to rustle up a game of Omaha poker.

TUE 27

ESPN Nomination Show (8 p.m., ESPN). Revel in dazzling streaks and highlights galore. And that's just Dirk Nowitzki's hair.



ROBERT SEALE / SN

WED 28

The burning question heading into this year's **NBA draft** (7 p.m., ESPN): Will David Stern's nasal monotone be rendered inaudible by the bloodcurdling screams of Stephen A. Smith?

FRI 30

In Their Own Words: Dennis Green (8 p.m., NFL Network). Get to know the man who is sometimes controversial and always upbeat and confident. Well, try to get to know him—it has been kind of hard to understand him ever since Edgerrin James bought him that mouthful of gold.

—Steve Greenberg



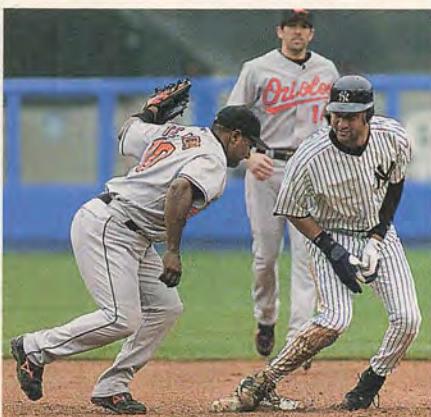
COMING AT YOU

In the July 7 issue

Stargazing. OK, you're putting together a major league All-Star roster. Any current player is up for grabs. Do you go with Miguel Tejada at shortstop or Derek Jeter? How about at DH—do you want Jim Thome at the plate, or would you rather put your run-generating trust in Travis Hafner? The possibilities are enough to make a sane man crazy, so we did the hard part—deciding the team. The easy part—telling us how nuts our choices are—will be left up to you.

■ They're the athletes who quietly use their fortunes to ease the misfortunes of others. They're the Good Guys.

■ The NFL is full of players who have spent the spring rehabbing, but how ready will they be for training camp? Find out in our exclusive team reports.



JOHN DUNN FOR SN

Miggy and Jeter—gotta love 'em both, but there can be only one starter at short.

BOB HILLE'S STARTING

5

1 The World Cup.

OK, I underestimated the passion this thing invokes. I made a "Brazil nuts" joke and nearly ended up a side dish at a churrascaria.

2 The NBA draft.

You gotta read this agent thing (page 16). Man, talk about a business that needs a good Rosenhaus-cleaning.

3 The NHL playoffs.

You can tell which Caniacs were late to the bandwagon. They're NASCAR fans who think the Stanley Cup is sponsored by the official tool of the NHL.

4 Jim Harrick.

He's the new coach of the Bakersfield Jam in the D-League. Of course, if Jim Jr. gets involved, it might end up being the A-League, if you know what I mean.

5 The College World Series.

It's great how Nebraskans adopt programs. And, after a while, the visitors make themselves at home. In fact, the Cal-State Fullerton team wants Bill Callahan fired.

MY TURN

sdeveney@sportingnews.com

Sean Deveney 111 percent Feelin' bubbly

**It's championship season—I want to celebrate!
In my shower! By myself! Hey, it's not what you think.**

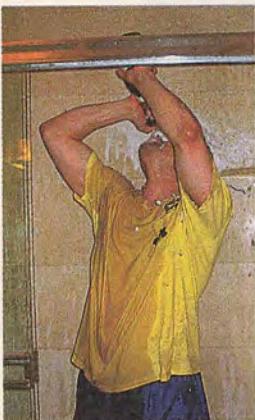
There's a scene in *Eight Men Out* in which the 1919 White Sox receive a bonus from tightwad owner Charlie Comiskey: champagne. Flat champagne. Eighty-six years later, the South Siders hadn't learned much about proper celebration. When the Sox won the 2005 World Series, their champagne was Barefoot. This isn't *Wine Spectator*, but I know this: Barefoot goes for seven bucks and is delicate as battery acid. Little wonder every eye in the Sox locker room was pink and swollen as a rubber ball.

When the Spurs won the NBA title last year, coach Gregg Popovich didn't have much spirit for the choice of spirits. "My eyes are burning," he said. "It's pretty cheap stuff."

It often is.

Championship season in the NBA and NHL meant another round of bubbly abuse. Title teams don't give much thought to choosing champagne. As one whose face takes plenty of champagne shrapnel, I wish they would.

I'm no champagne expert. But Charles Stanfield of Sam's Wines & Spirits in Chicago is. In fact, he's a knight—a chevalier—in France. I went to Stanfield with a question: If you won a



It never would have been possible without years of journalism training.

championship, which champagne would you want sprayed on you? He led me first to a \$715 bottle of 1992 Krug. "You'd have to pour it in thimbles," he said.

Championship champagne, we decided, should have four characteristics: low sting factor, cool-looking bottle, decent taste and reasonable price. (Most of it will, after all, be dumped out.) Stanfield led me to four offerings: Gloria Ferrer, Veuve de Vernay, Korbel and Cristalino. Each bottle was sufficiently cool and under \$15.

All that was left was tasting the champagne, which would be easy. And spraying it all over my face and eyes, which would not. However, in the interest of locker room celebrations

everywhere, I stood in my shower and systematically doused myself. My wife—yet again questioning the sanity of that "I do" vow—took notes.

The results, friends, are in.

Fourth place: Cristalino.

After dumping it on my forehead, I announced to my wife, "It feels like liquid Ebola." Didn't taste bad, but the stuff doesn't react well to skin.

Third place: Veuve de Vernay. This is light, easy to drink and without aftertaste. Which is odd because, when poured on one's face, it stings like a thousand angry bees.

Second place: Korbel.

There was an initial smack when the champagne hit my skin, but it faded very quickly. Taste is another issue. *Yech.* This is strictly a spraying champagne.

First place: Gloria Ferrer.

The clear winner. It was easy on the eyes. It smelled funky but was pleasant on the face and forehead, like eating Pop Rocks. And though it was a little dry and sour, there was no aftertaste.

Thus, I hereby encourage future champions—for the sake of players, front office honchos and us media doofuses—to load up on the GF. So, congratulations, Gloria Ferrer. Feel free to celebrate by pouring yourself all over yourself.

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YOUR TURN

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I wish Big Ben a speedy recovery. He's stupid and foolish, but I hope the reports of a quick recovery are true.

—tsnmember_166423 via SportingNews.com

■ If I were a professional athlete, I would lock myself in a padded room to protect myself from all of the stupid decisions I could make with that money. —fragnoli via SportingNews.com

■ Ben Roethlisberger should feel a responsibility to not do anything stupid to jeopardize his career. The Steelers pay him a lot of money and in return expect him to be available to play. Oldsters like me don't tell these kids to wear a helmet for our health. Wise up, kid. —Pat Gibson, Millsboro, Del.

■ Maybe J.J. Redick was just trying to give himself some street cred. I bet the Blazers and the Knicks are falling all over themselves trying to line up Redick. The Knicks could trade every future draft pick they will ever get to the Raps and take J.J. No. 1 overall. Don't laugh—with

■ My friends and I were cruising along I-69 when we saw a Vette with a Detroit Tigers license plate. I grabbed my SPORTING News and read through the Tigers story again (SN, June 16)—that Vette was the writer's car! We slowed down and tried to get Steven Losey to stop. I rolled down the window, showed him the magazine and shouted, "Pull over; we want to talk to you!" Steven pulled over and signed my copy. We talked for a few minutes and took pictures of him and the plate. Pretty cool! —Rick Heitmeyer, Sheridan, Mich.

the Knicks' crack management team, it could happen. —rod hard via SportingNews.com

■ I read with a huge smile Tricia Garner's article about little league baseball (SN, June 16). Her take is dead-on, and every coach I know has shared the same experience. In fact, I think I have at least three Kevins on my own



Losey (right) has been pulled over before ... just not like this.

team! —Neal Bagshaw, Chester, Va.

■ Your reasoning behind the Patriots' grade in your offseason report card (SN, June 16) had me scratching my head. The Patriots have been the dominant team in the NFL for a reason: They don't overpay. —Tim Farrell, Dorchester, Mass.

BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

RE: NO LOVE HERE

Posted by Flashjeff

The Sixers have a roster full of underachievers and couldn't play defense if their lives depended on it. They have hoarded young, unproven players and flushed money down the toilet on fringe players who contribute nothing and aging superstars whose best years are behind them. But all of those warts pale in comparison to the really big problem hovering over the team: What should it do with Allen Iverson?

RE: SAY GOODBYE

Posted by Burghers

I like the Pirates' young core of players and am impressed with the way the pitching staff has come along. However, Craig Wilson has to go. His selfish comments and his lack of passion turn my stomach. If this young team is going to continue to improve, it does not need a cancer in the clubhouse. Trade Wilson now and at least get something for him.

RE: TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Posted by jameeman

Many feel that Ben Roethlisberger should not be castigated for riding without a helmet. Regardless of what they may think, athletes and musicians set the standards for our young people; like it or not, they are role models. It has been pointed out that Pennsylvania law does not mandate that a rider wear a helmet, but I would submit that this isn't so much a matter of law as it is a matter of common sense.

■ Any World Cup game involving the United States

■ A great World Cup matchup not involving the United States

56%

67%

POLLING PLACE
Which would you rather watch?

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ELISE AMENDOLA / AP

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Ask your doctor if Viagra is right for you. And enjoy what it can do to help you improve your sex life.

VIAGRA is prescribed to treat erectile dysfunction. We know that no medicine is for everyone. If you use nitrate drugs, often used for chest pain (known as angina), don't take VIAGRA. Taking these drugs together could cause your blood pressure to drop to an unsafe level.

Talk with your doctor first. Make sure you are healthy enough to have sex. If you have chest pain, nausea, or other discomforts during sex, seek medical help right away.

Although erections lasting for more than four hours may occur rarely with all ED treatments in this drug class, to avoid long-term injuries, it is important to seek immediate medical help.

In rare instances, men taking PDE5 inhibitors (oral erectile dysfunction medicines, including VIAGRA) reported a sudden decrease or loss of vision. It is not possible to determine whether these events are related directly to these medicines or to other factors. If you experience sudden decrease or loss of vision, stop taking PDE5 inhibitors, including VIAGRA, and call a doctor right away.

The most common side effects of VIAGRA are headache, facial flushing, and upset stomach. Less common are bluish or blurred vision, or being sensitive to light. These may occur for a brief time. Remember to protect yourself and your partner from sexually transmitted diseases.

Please see our patient summary of information for VIAGRA (25 mg, 50 mg, 100 mg) tablets on the following page.

VIAGRA is available on most Managed Care Plans.* VIAGRA is one of several ED treatments that you and your doctor can consider.

*Percent of members by formulary status for HMOs, PPOs and POS for Viagra. Formulary Compass™ MediMedia USA, Inc. May 2006.

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VIAGRA®

(sildenafil citrate) tablets

This summary contains important information about VIAGRA®. It is not meant to take the place of your doctor's instructions. Read this information carefully before you start taking VIAGRA. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if you do not understand any of this information or if you want to know more about VIAGRA.

This medicine can help many men when it is used as prescribed by their doctors. However, VIAGRA is not for everyone. It is intended for use only by men who have a condition called erectile dysfunction. VIAGRA must never be used by men who are taking medicines that contain nitrates of any kind, at any time. This includes nitroglycerin. If you take VIAGRA with any nitrate medicine your blood pressure could suddenly drop to an unsafe or life threatening level.

• What Is VIAGRA?

VIAGRA is a pill used to treat erectile dysfunction (impotence) in men. It can help many men who have erectile dysfunction get and keep an erection when they become sexually excited (stimulated).

You will not get an erection just by taking this medicine. VIAGRA helps a man with erectile dysfunction get an erection only when he is sexually excited.

• How Sex Affects the Body

When a man is sexually excited, the penis rapidly fills with more blood than usual. The penis then expands and hardens. This is called an erection. After the man is done having sex, this extra blood flows out of the penis back into the body. The erection goes away. If an erection lasts for a long time (more than 6 hours), it can permanently damage your penis. You should call a doctor immediately if you ever have a prolonged erection that lasts more than 4 hours.

Some conditions and medicines interfere with this natural erection process. The penis cannot fill with enough blood. The man cannot have an erection. This is called erectile dysfunction if it becomes a frequent problem.

During sex, your heart works harder. Therefore sexual activity may not be advisable for people who have heart problems. Before you start any treatment for erectile dysfunction, ask your doctor if your heart is healthy enough to handle the extra strain of having sex. If you have chest pains, dizziness or nausea during sex, stop having sex and immediately tell your doctor you have had this problem.

• How VIAGRA Works

VIAGRA enables many men with erectile dysfunction to respond to sexual stimulation. When a man is sexually excited, VIAGRA helps the penis fill with enough blood to cause an erection. After sex is over, the erection goes away.

• VIAGRA Is Not for Everyone

As noted above (*How Sex Affects the Body*), ask your doctor if your heart is healthy enough for sexual activity.

If you take any medicines that contain nitrates – either regularly or as needed – you should never take VIAGRA. If you take VIAGRA with any nitrate medicine or recreational drug containing nitrates, your blood pressure could suddenly drop to an unsafe level. You could get dizzy, faint, or even have a heart attack or stroke. Nitrates are found in many prescription medicines that are used to treat angina (chest pain due to heart disease) such as:

- nitroglycerin (sprays, ointments, skin patches or pastes, and tablets that are swallowed or dissolved in the mouth)
- isosorbide mononitrate and isosorbide dinitrate (tablets that are swallowed, chewed, or dissolved in the mouth)

Nitrates are also found in recreational drugs such as amyl nitrate or nitrite ("poppers"). If you are not sure if any of your medicines contain nitrates, or if you do not understand what nitrates are, ask your doctor or pharmacist.

VIAGRA is only for patients with erectile dysfunction. VIAGRA is not for newborns, children, or women. Do not let anyone else take your VIAGRA. VIAGRA must be used only under a doctor's supervision.

• What VIAGRA Does Not Do

- VIAGRA does not cure erectile dysfunction. It is a treatment for erectile dysfunction.
- VIAGRA does not protect you or your partner from getting sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV — the virus that causes AIDS.
- VIAGRA is not a hormone or an aphrodisiac.

• What To Tell Your Doctor Before You Begin VIAGRA

Only your doctor can decide if VIAGRA is right for you. VIAGRA can cause mild, temporary lowering of your blood pressure. You will need to have a thorough medical exam to diagnose your erectile dysfunction and to find out if you can safely take VIAGRA alone or with your other medicines. Your doctor should determine if your heart is healthy enough to handle the extra strain of having sex.

Be sure to tell your doctor if you:

- have ever had any heart problems (e.g., angina, chest pain, heart failure, irregular heart beats, heart attack or narrowing of the aortic valve)
- have ever had a stroke
- have low or high blood pressure
- have a rare inherited eye disease called retinitis pigmentosa
- have ever had any kidney problems
- have ever had any liver problems
- have ever had any blood problems, including sickle cell anemia or leukemia
- are allergic to sildenafil or any of the other ingredients of VIAGRA tablets
- have a deformed penis, Peyronie's disease, or ever had an erection that lasted more than 4 hours
- have stomach ulcers or any types of bleeding problems
- are taking any other medicines

• VIAGRA and Other Medicines

Some medicines can change the way VIAGRA works. Tell your doctor about any medicines you are taking. Do not start or stop taking any medicines before checking with your doctor or pharmacist. This includes prescription and nonprescription medicines or remedies:

- Remember, VIAGRA should never be used with medicines that contain nitrates (see *VIAGRA Is Not for Everyone*).
- If you are taking alpha-blocker therapy for the treatment of high blood pressure or prostate problems, you should not take a dose of greater than 25 mg of VIAGRA at the same time (within 4 hours) as you take your dose of alpha-blocker.
- If you are taking a protease inhibitor, your dose may be adjusted (please see *Finding the Right Dose for You*).
- VIAGRA should not be used with any other medical treatments that cause erections. These treatments include pills, medicines that are injected or inserted into the penis, implants or vacuum pumps.

• Finding the Right Dose for You

VIAGRA comes in different doses (25 mg, 50 mg and 100 mg). If you do not get the results you expect, talk with your doctor. You and your doctor can determine the dose that works best for you.

- Do not take more VIAGRA than your doctor prescribes.
- If you think you need a larger dose of VIAGRA, check with your doctor.
- VIAGRA should not be taken more than once a day.

If you are older than age 65, or have serious liver or kidney problems, your doctor may start you at the lowest dose (25 mg) of VIAGRA. If you are taking protease inhibitors, such as for the treatment of HIV, your doctor may recommend a 25 mg dose and may limit you to a maximum single dose of 25 mg of VIAGRA in a 48 hour period. If you are taking alpha-blocker therapy, you should not take a dose of greater than 25 mg of VIAGRA at the same time (within 4 hours) as your dose of alpha-blocker.

• How To Take VIAGRA

Take VIAGRA about one hour before you plan to have sex. Beginning in about 30 minutes and for up to 4 hours, VIAGRA can help you get an erection if you are sexually excited. If you take VIAGRA after a high-fat meal (such as a cheeseburger and french fries), the medicine may take a little longer to start working. VIAGRA can help you get an erection when you are sexually excited. You will not get an erection just by taking the pill.

• Possible Side Effects

Like all medicines, VIAGRA can cause some side effects. These effects are usually mild to moderate and usually don't last longer than a few hours. Some of these side effects are more likely to occur with higher doses. The most common side effects of VIAGRA are headache, flushing of the face, and upset stomach. Less common side effects that may occur are temporary changes in color vision (such as trouble telling the difference between blue and green objects or having a blue color tinge to them), eyes being more sensitive to light, or blurred vision.

In rare instances, men have reported an erection that lasts many hours. You should call a doctor immediately if you ever have an erection that lasts more than 4 hours. If not treated right away, permanent damage to your penis could occur (see *How Sex Affects the Body*). Heart attack, stroke, irregular heart beats, and death have been reported rarely in men taking VIAGRA. Most, but not all, of these men had heart problems before taking this medicine. It is not possible to determine whether these events were directly related to VIAGRA.

VIAGRA may cause other side effects besides those listed on this sheet. If you want more information or develop any side effects or symptoms you are concerned about, call your doctor.

• Accidental Overdose

In case of accidental overdose, call your doctor right away.

• Storing VIAGRA

Keep VIAGRA out of the reach of children. Keep VIAGRA in its original container. Store at 25°C (77°F); excursions permitted to 15–30°C (59–86°F) [see USP Controlled Room Temperature].

• For More Information on VIAGRA

VIAGRA is a prescription medicine used to treat erectile dysfunction. Only your doctor can decide if it is right for you. This sheet is only a summary. If you have any questions or want more information about VIAGRA, talk with your doctor or pharmacist, visit www.viagra.com, or call 1-888-4VIAGRA.



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September 2002

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL KNOW



These boots are made for racing—Hansen knows cars and footwear.

Sports talk with Courtney Hansen

TV host, garage lifer

SN: You replaced Danica Patrick as host of PowerBlock on Spike TV. What's that been like?

HANSEN: I was totally flattered. She's an amazing driver and person. I love what she's done to empower women. We're infiltrating what was a male industry.

SN: What's your passion in auto racing? Are you a big NASCAR fan?

HANSEN: I love it all. Growing up in racing made me feel a part of it. Formula One, SCCA with my dad (legendary amateur driver Jerry Hansen) and his career, definitely drag racing. Every form appeals.

SN: What do you drive?

HANSEN: A "foushod"-out 2004 Thunderbird. I love it because the '57 Thunderbird is one of my faves and the 2004 is reminiscent. I'll never sell it. I also just got an Aston Martin DB9 convertible, a gorgeous car, superpowerful—it's a V12. I'm really excited about it.

SN: You graduated from Florida State. Does Bobby Bowden still got it?

HANSEN: He's still got it, definitely. We're gonna do better this year than we have lately. We're gonna kick Florida's butt.

SN: You were named one of FHM's 100 sexiest women in the world. Are you a pretty face who knows cars or a car expert with a pretty face?

HANSEN: The second one! But thank you for the compliment.—Steve Greenberg

If Tiger wants to catch Lefty, he better call Butch

Mickelson blew it, plain and simple. There, that's out of the way.

But let's make this just as clear: No matter what the statistics say—and they still claim Tiger Woods is the No. 1 player in the world—there's no one close to Phil Mickelson right now.

Not Retief Goosen, who suffered a confidence crisis after last year's U.S. Open meltdown. Not Ernie Els, who is playing uncertainly after knee surgery. Not Vijay Singh, who is unable to hit the cup with even a 10-foot putt. And not Woods, whose quest for perfection has undermined the importance of winning.

Lefty sabotaged his "Mickelslam" because he refused to believe he couldn't send a cut 3-iron shot onto the green of the 72nd hole at the U.S. Open. It's easy now to say he should have chosen discretion and laid up, which almost certainly would have put him in a playoff—at worst—and probably would have given him his third straight victory in a major tournament.

Mickelson's, uh, *adventuresome* shot bounced off an oak tree, and he finished with a double bogey and a shot behind Aussie winner Geoff Ogilvy.

"This one is going to take a little while to get over," Mickelson says. "It was right there, and I let it go. I just cannot believe I did that."

But he was there at the end, at least. Woods had packed his bags after a pair of inglorious 76s left him three shots above the cut line.

His early exit from the Open underscored questions about the swing changes he has made under teacher Hank

Haney. Beyond that, Woods' performance at Winged Foot suggests his pursuit of Jack Nicklaus' record 18 major titles is in serious jeopardy.

After winning the 1997 Masters, Tiger retooled his swing under swing coach Butch Harmon's watchful eye. The process took roughly 18 months, but it propelled Woods to an incomparable stretch that included seven major championship titles in 11 starts. Woods' victory in the 2000 U.S. Open at



CHARLES KRUPA / AP (2)

Don't look so indignant, Tiger—you know Lefty is swinging the club better these days.

Pebble Beach may have been the most masterful tournament ever played.

But the compact, athletic, dependable swing that allowed Tiger to dominate professional golf at the turn of the century bears little resemblance to his current motion, which appears labored, out of kilter and erratic.

Woods' game has regressed since he split with Harmon and hired Haney to fill the void. The quest for microscopic improvement appears to have blinded Woods to the realization that holding all four major titles at the same time is as good as it can get.

Since joining forces with Haney, Tiger has but one mantra: "I'm close, I'm close." At this point, it's time to acknowledge it's "Close, but no cigar."

Woods still wins on the PGA Tour, but that doesn't validate his current course. Because of his abundant talent, Woods probably could win on Tour with a chair strapped to his back.

You think it's time for Tiger to put pride aside, pick up the phone and start mending fences with a guy named Butch?

His legacy may depend on it.

—Reid Spencer

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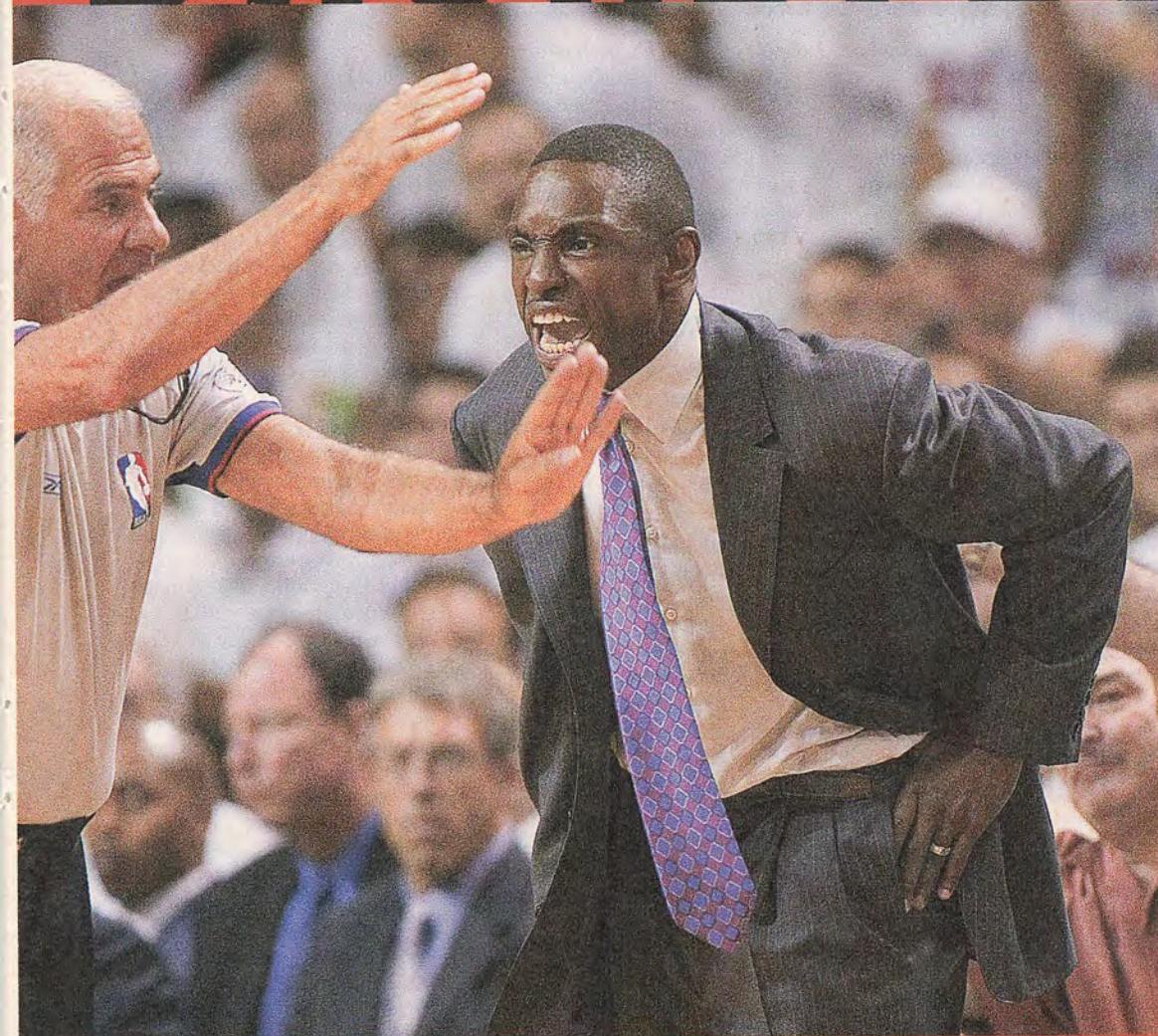
NBA FINALS

A reach here or a grab there is nothing for Wade compared to the elbows he used to get from his old man in the backyard. Johnson, for one, was screaming mad about the way his team was defending the Heat superstar.

PLAYGROUND

Much of what Miami's **Dwyane Wade** needed to know about playing in The Finals—and much of what Dallas' **Avery Johnson** needed to know about coaching in them—was learned on the blacktop *By Sean Deveney*

BASKETBALL

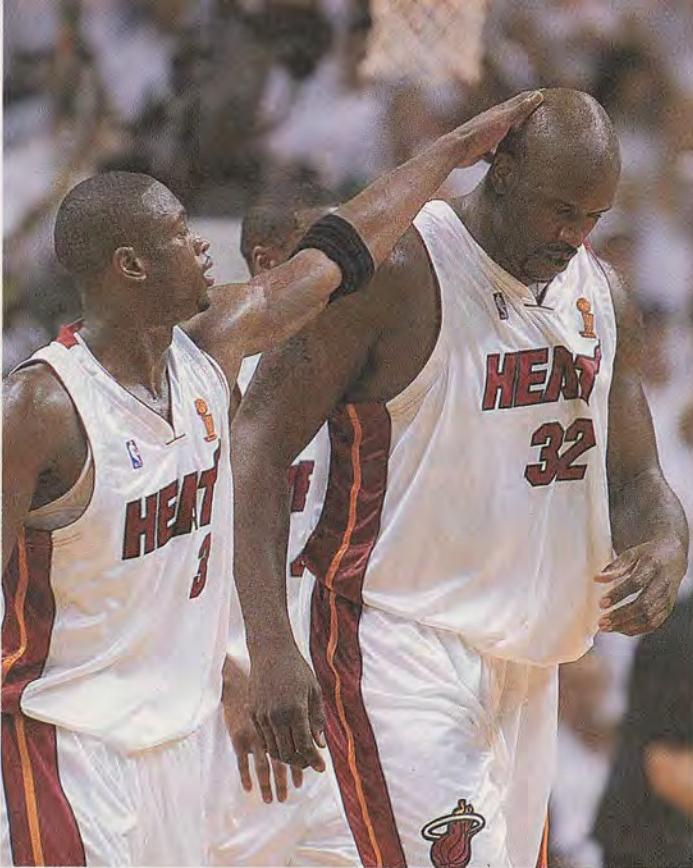


Here we are, at the culmination of the NBA Finals, a matchup of a handful of the best basketball players in the world, and somehow the lofty talk that championship series engender—the enduring stamp this series will put on the legacies of the stars involved, the exposition on the evolution of the game, the game plans, scouting reports and Spielbergian film sessions—all can be tossed in favor of old-fashioned playground chatter. Two playgrounds, really. The first is a slab of backyard concrete in Robbins, Ill., a southwest Chicago suburb, at the house where Heat guard Dwyane Wade grew up. The second is Lemon Playground on Causeway Boulevard just outside of New Orleans, a run-down patch of blacktop blocks from the Mississippi River and a few miles from St. Augustine, the high school that produced Mavericks coach Avery Johnson.

See, on one hand, Wade

learned about hard falls and rough-and-tumble pickup games on a garage hoop in his yard, where he played against older (and bigger) family members and friends. Wade's father, Dwyane Sr., was a local rec league player and frequently muscled the younger Wade into fences and onto the concrete in one-on-one games. That will toughen up anybody, even the league's most frequently dinged, contused and sprained young superstar. Wade carries himself like a running back, which might explain why, earlier in the playoffs, Nets coach Lawrence Frank compared him to running back Barry Sanders. Heat coach Pat Riley went further. In discussing the way Wade dusts himself off after particularly hard falls, Riley says, "He's starting to take on sort of the—and I say this with great respect—the same approach that Jim Brown had."

On the other hand, Johnson—who had a 16-year career in the NBA despite standing just 5-11 and going undrafted out of college—learned much about the guts required for NBA success from games in the swampy summer humidity at Lemon Playground. The Finals may be basketball's pinnacle, and it may be that the league office wants to legislate a gentler, more aesthetically pleasing game (see



Wade and Shaq: just two kids having fun on the basketball court.

Jerry Stackhouse's suspension for a questionably hard foul on Shaquille O'Neal in Game 4), but this game's lessons still are best taught on the blacktop. At times during this series, Johnson gave the impression that he'd like to dump all the lavishings of The

Finals and take his players out to Lemon for a refresher course. "Where I'm from, they call it playground basketball," Johnson says. "And a lot of the time, that's what it is, because you can't expect anybody to bail you out."

After taking the first two games

Wade keeps on ticking, which ticks off opponents

Dwyane Wade hits the floor often, which has given his teammates and coaches in Miami some tense moments. Other observers, though, roll their eyes at the frequency of Wade's physical problems. In response to an accusation that he exaggerates injuries, Wade says, "If I'm hurt, I'm hurt. Y'all have seen me; I don't have to fake." Certainly, Wade has been no stranger to the trainer's room this postseason.

Round 1, Game 1.

Wade suffered a cramp in his left calf against the Bulls, which left him with what he called a "pimp walk." He shot just 8-for-21 in the game but had 30 points and 11 assists.

Round 1, Game 5.

Wade took a hard fall just before halftime and needed to be helped to the locker room. He was injected with a painkiller and limped back out to finish the game. He would need painkillers to play Game 6, too.

Round 2, Game 3.

Vince Carter's elbow bloodied Wade's mouth in the third quarter. Wade came back in time to score 15 of his 30 points in the fourth quarter of a key road win over the Nets.

Conference finals, Game 6.

Wade, having suffered from the flu for two days, checked into a hospital in the morning and was given fluids. He was sent home at 3 p.m., then suited up for the series-clinching game against the Pistons. After starting 1-for-5 from the field and needing an IV at halftime, he shot 5-for-10 in the second half and finished with 14 points, 10 assists and a Heat win.

NBA Finals, Game 3.

When Shaquille O'Neal took a charge and fell backward last Tuesday, his head whacked Wade's left knee and caused a bruise that forced Wade to miss Wednesday's practice before Game 4. Wade was transported from the daily press conference on a flatbed cart. The Mavs were skeptical about the injury, with good cause: Wade lit them up for 36 points on 13-for-23 shooting the next night.

at home, Dallas had a hard time conjuring up the playground mentality Johnson fought all year to instill; meanwhile Wade recaptured the grit he learned at his dad's elbows (left and right) in the backyard. Johnson has chosen to be aggressive with double-teams on O'Neal, which limits his team's options when it comes to guarding Wade. Wade helped erase a 13-point, fourth quarter deficit in Game 3 by scoring 15 points down the stretch and 42 on the night. In Game 4, with two early fouls sending O'Neal to the bench in the first quarter, Wade took over by scoring 24 first half points in what eventually was a 24-point win (and a 36-point performance by Wade). Not until Game 5 was Dallas able to find an answer for Wade in Miami, and even then, it was short-lived as he led a second half rally that erased an 8-point halftime deficit. He made a game-tying bank shot with 2.8 seconds remaining to send the game into overtime, then added a pair of free throws to win the game.

The Mavericks struggled to find answers, a reality that so frustrated their coach that he had the entire team moved out of its posh, five-star hotel in downtown Miami—to close to the "distractions," as Johnson noted, of family members and South Beach—to more austere digs 25 miles north in Fort Lauderdale. True, Fort Lauderdale is not known for its mean streets, but clearly this was an effort to harden the Mavericks' approach, especially toward Wade. Before Game 5, Johnson enumerated Wade's successes: He'd beaten his man one-on-one, he'd stepped through quick traps, he'd spun out of slow traps and he'd made shots over the zone.

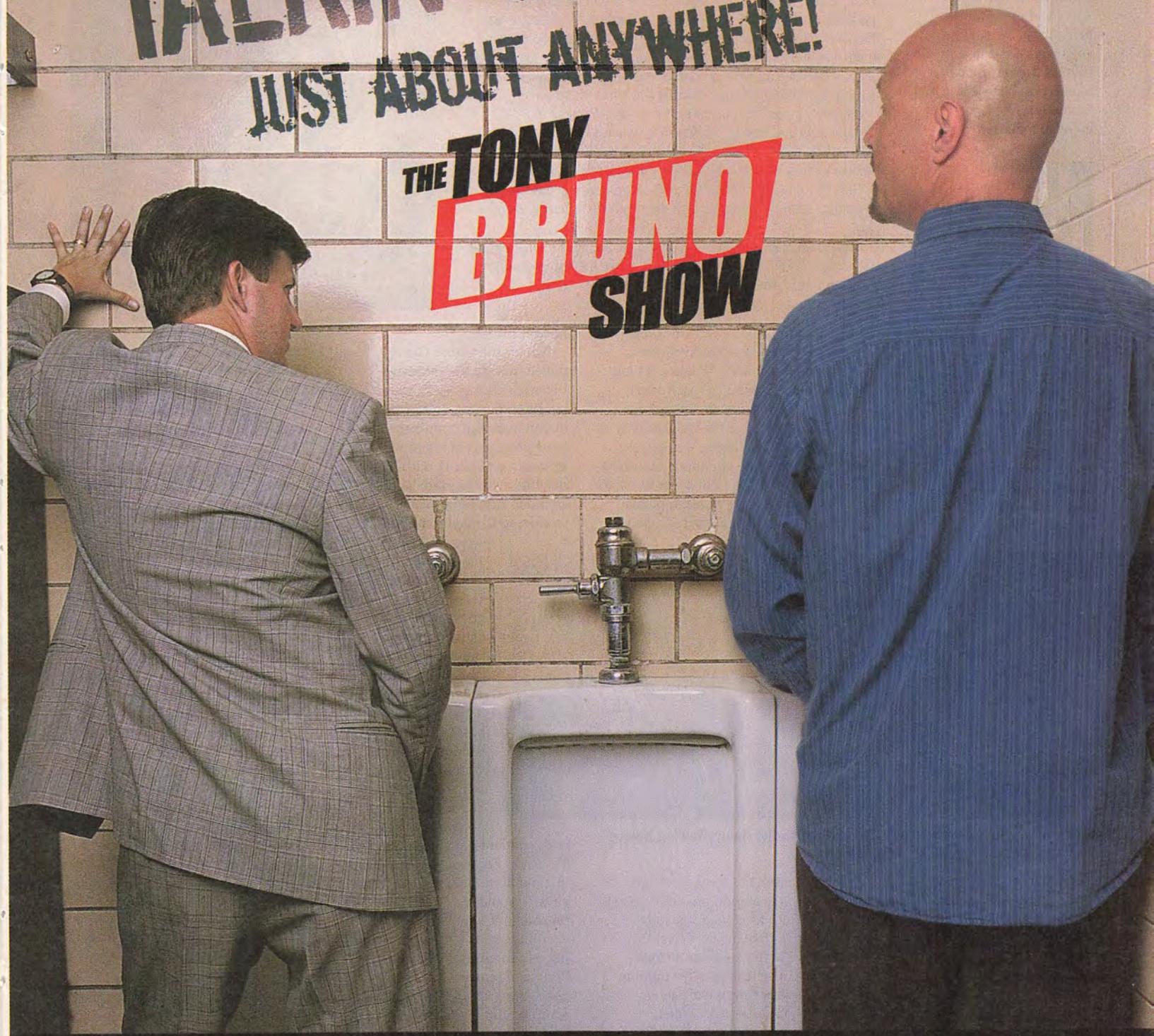
"I'm just going to try to come up with another kind of defense," Johnson says, knowing well there are no other kinds. "Maybe, at some point, somebody will get angry enough on our team and we'll guard him a little stronger."

Johnson appeared to have found that angry someone in Game 5 when Devin Harris roughed up Wade for much of the first quarter. By the time the series had turned back to Dallas, where the Mavericks hoped to lean on their home-floor success (and expose Miami's road

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weakness), Johnson had shuffled through his entire deck of perimeter defenders; he used Adrian Griffin and Josh Howard on Wade but turned, too, to Harris, Marquis Daniels, Jason Terry and even Darrell Armstrong. "When you get a guy who is in a rhythm the way he has been," Harris says, "sometimes he is just going to make his shots."

Making shots was on the minds of both O'Neal and Wade when they met at the Heat's practice facility last week after the pummeling the Heat received in two losses in Dallas. Ostensibly, they were there to work on O'Neal's shooting—he had his worst playoff performance ever in Game 2, when he shot 2-for-5 and scored five points. But they just as well could have been there for Wade's sake. He, too, struggled in Dallas and, besides, O'Neal already had come to a realization: It was Wade

A hiccup in Howard's development

While Dwyane Wade has done well to carry the mantle for the 2003 draft class in these Finals, another member of that group, Josh Howard, has found the series to be a bit of a bummer. Howard entered The Finals with an 18.0-point average on 47.6 percent shooting in this year's playoffs and an emerging reputation as a top defensive player. But against the Heat, he has been tentative on offense and put together just one solid showing in the first four games of the series. He needed to go to the basket more, something he did not do in Game 4—Howard was 1-for-8, missed four 3-pointers and took just two shots in the paint.

He finally ended his offensive slump with 25 points and 10 rebounds in Game 5, but Howard's defense has been subpar, too—he was burned repeatedly by Wade throughout the series. He also left his feet when challenging the game-winning attempt by Gary Payton at the end of Game 3—Payton simply dribbled, stepped around Howard and sank the shot with 9.3 seconds to play.

Howard has had a breakout year and, at 25, he is a large part of Dallas' future. For much of The Finals, though, the Mavericks were wishing Howard was a bigger part of the present. —S.D.



situations and off-court nonsense. Sort of a playground version of campfire stories. "I'm just telling him war stories," O'Neal says. "He's just asking me questions about what I've been through in 13 years. You know, we're going through game situations. Actually, it's like two kids out there."

Well, one kid, at least, plus a grizzled Hall of Fame big man who

not get rattled."

Not by the team's Game 5 deficit, nor by the rabid-dog defense the Mavericks were intent on playing. Not even by the many dives and stumbles that have been part of his game since he was a pipsqueak battling neighbors in the yard. Wade falls so much that Riley even wondered if, maybe, Wade was

actually a better player when slightly hurt. At full strength, Riley theorizes, Wade tries to play 100 mph, but when injured, he is more patient and slows down his game. Though Riley worries Wade's fondness for floor burns could lead to long-term injury, he rationalizes, "He is somebody who

really understands how to fall. There are some guys who have an instinct about falling. He actually says, 'I would rather fall than step on someone's ankle.'

Johnson has encouraged his players to be sure Wade hits the floor as often as possible, with good, hard, clean fouls. Dallas returned home understanding that Wade requires full defensive attention. The Mavericks played superior perimeter defense this season by allowing 44.3 percent shooting, but they've been at times solid and at times terrible in guarding Wade—if this team is

to be a repeated presence in June, it must improve at stopping star scorers. Even with Johnson working to add a dash of Lemon (Playground) to his defense before the series' end, it has become clear the Mavericks' short-term problem in this series—stopping Wade—now will be a long-term problem for the rest of the league.

"I figure it will be 10 or 12 years of him doing stuff like this," says one Eastern Conference personnel official. "He is going to get better. He is going to make more and more clutch plays. Think about it—at his age, how long he is going to play? If Shaq is effective at all as he gets older—not great, just effective—this kid is going to be a hell of a tough guy to deal with. That's a tough thought if you're in the East."

Riley, for one, is happy not to have to contend with that problem. Looking over all Wade already had accomplished in these Finals—win or lose—Riley says, "I think probably he's going to surpass this in his career. People will be talking about a lot more games that he will play that will be memorable."

When Riley's coaching staff handed out its game day scouting report before Game 4 (with the Heat down, 2-1), written across the top was this sentiment: "Faith is daring the soul to go beyond what the eyes can see." Up against even the most daunting task, with Wade a little faith seems in order.



ROBERT SEALE / SN (2)

Wade seems to spend as much time falling to the floor, drawing bumps and bruises, as he does standing upright.

who mattered most to the Heat's success. Dallas was focusing its double-teams on O'Neal, but O'Neal knows the Heat can win with Wade dominating and O'Neal serving as a 350-pound decoy.

So the two shot, sometimes on opposite ends, sometimes with O'Neal posting up an imaginary defender and making a move or two before kicking it out to Wade. All the while, O'Neal regaled Wade with tales of postseasons past. Shaq told him about his championships and failures, game

has passed the torch. As a kid, Wade is in an odd position, thrust early into the championship spotlight because of O'Neal's arrival in the summer of 2004. This isn't the long, slow buildup that fellow third-year players LeBron James and Carmelo Anthony figure to be in for. Wade, already mature before he landed in the league, has grown up ahead of schedule thanks to O'Neal. "Dwyane is as mature as you can get for his age," says Miami forward Antoine Walker. "He does

NBADRAFT

How to make a million—in just one game

sn't this why it's called the lottery? Patrick O'Bryant woke up one March morning as a promising player for the Bradley Braves—a 7-foot, 240-pound sophomore center with length and agility and plenty of time to grow. Before teatime, he was a millionaire. As they say: You've got to play to win.

The numbers that made him wealthy: 10-of-17 from the field, 8-of-9 from the foul line, 28 points, seven rebounds and just 12 points surrendered to Pitt 7-footer Aaron Gray. O'Bryant's excellence in that second-round NCAA Tournament game led Bradley to a spot in the Sweet 16.

"If we never made the tournament, I'd probably still be at Bradley," O'Bryant says. "That's just how it is."

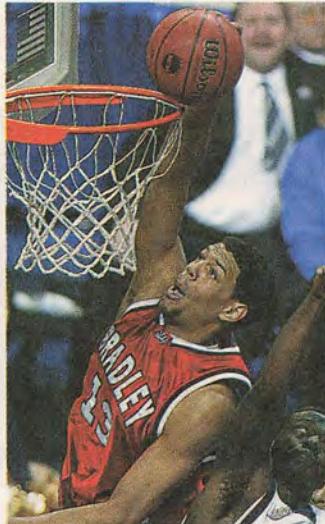
Instead, O'Bryant is sitting in a lounge at Disney's BoardWalk Inn as a featured attraction at the NBA's predraft camp. He probably will be one of the first 10 picks in

the June 28 draft—a stunning development for a player who, less than three years ago, was not offered a scholarship by any big-time school.

"Because this is a crapshoot draft," ESPN analyst Fran Fraschilla says, "he could get picked at 10 and end up better than the guys picked ahead of him."

When O'Bryant competed at Blaine High in Minnesota, there was no reason to believe he would be a two-and-done college player. Bradley coach Jim Les saw possibilities in his length and great hands but admits, "There weren't a lot of people banging on his door."

When the University of Minnesota scouted him as a prep junior, "More often than not, you'd see him score two points or four points," coach Dan Monson says. He talked with O'Bryant about possibly redshirting as a freshman and encouraged him to



AL GOLDS / AP

Bradley's O'Bryant showed himself the money when he pounded Pitt.

show his love for the game.

The redshirt suggestion was a mistake because O'Bryant wanted to start his career immediately. He then found his passion at Bradley. O'Bryant hadn't lifted weights before he arrived in college and did not believe he understood

basketball until he worked with Les and the Bradley coaching staff. He progressed quickly, particularly as a shot blocker. He developed a reliable jump hook and, though Les didn't encourage him to during games, the ability to move outside and shoot facing the goal from about 15 feet.

O'Bryant, 20, still needs to gain weight and continue to develop his low-post skills. He is not one of those big men, though, who tries to play like a guard. "My shot isn't that good. It's probably not going to happen," he says. He is proud to be a center and wants to get picked as early as possible so he can get his stuff out of storage and move to his new city.

"I feel like I earned it," O'Bryant says. "I worked hard to impress the people I had to in order to get here. If it was just something that fell into my lap—like every other big man in the nation got hurt or something—that'd be different."

—Mike DeCourcy

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Um, not so much.

By
Sean
Deveney

SO,

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wanna
be an
NBA
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Why not, right? Face it, Skippy, there comes a time when you realize that, no matter how scrappy you may be, you're just not going to land the point guard spot on an NBA roster. It's a sad day, but, yes, you will have to trade in those high-top Cons for Cole Haans. Wave goodbye to the locker room, say hello to the cubicle.

But you wanna have it both ways, don't you? You're cooking up a plan to stay in basketball, to get into the NBA even though your vertical matches





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your shoe size. That's no reason you can't stay in the sport, and certainly it's no reason you can't become rich and powerful in the process. The answer is simple: You wanna be an agent.

You know you've thought about them—the mysterious guys at the NBA draft wearing Caraceni suits and seated in the background, arms draped around their soon-to-be-millionaire clients. They're the ones yapping on smartphones or thumbing BlackBerrys. You see their names pop up every now and then in the paper, touting their clients: David Falk. Arn Tellem. Aaron Goodwin. Bill Duffy. The big-time NBA agents.

"I think that is something that's in the back of the minds of a lot of young people," says Henry Thomas, a prominent agent who also has taught a sports law class at DePaul University for 23 years. "That's what made me want to do the class to begin with. There is something very attractive about (being an agent) as a way to make a living."

It's like going to an art museum, looking at a Jackson Pollock painting and saying, "Hell, I could do that!" You see an NBA agent and you think, "How hard could *that* be?"

"It is a tough, competitive business," Thomas says. "As I have been teaching, students always want to know what advice I would give. Well, it is hard."

How hard? Oh, Skippy, you have no idea. You really wanna be an agent? Keep reading.



NOREN TROTMAN / NBAE / GETTY IMAGES

Chitchatting with Alonzo Mourning (above, left), sipping bottled water and talking on fancy phones. Falk (above, right) and Goodwin (left) are living the life.

ROCKY WIDNER / NBAE / GETTY IMAGES



1 BECOME AN AGENT

Once you decide you're serious about becoming an NBA agent, here's what you do: Send a letter to Robert Gadson, the National Basketball Players

Association's director of security and agent administration. The address is Two Penn Plaza, Suite 2430, New York, NY 10121. Gadson will send you back a 17-page application packed with questions that range from softball ("high school attended," "past employment," "references") to hardball ("Do you allocate proportionate expenses among various player clients?") to, well, oddball ("Have you ever been adjudicated insane or legally incompetent by any court?").

Don't worry; there are no wrong answers. Take Question 6c, for example: "Have you ever been sued by any player (NBA or otherwise) for any reason?" One agent, Texas-based

Lance Luchnick, was sued by many of his former players—including Charles Barkley, who in his autobiography, *Outrageous!*, wrote of Luchnick, "Lance was putting my money, my hard-earned money, into high-risk, speculative ventures that to this day haven't earned me one dime." But look in the NBPA's annual agent listing from 2005 and, sure enough, there's Luchnick listed as a certified agent.

Once your application is complete, send it back to Gadson. The union will take 30 days to consider the application. Then, pop some champagne. You're officially an NBA agent.

Oh, and don't forget this—it is highlighted in bold letters on the cover letter from Gadson—your check for \$1,500 is due when you apply. And that's due every year, by July 1. Says one agent: "The union doesn't give a rat's ass about your application. As long as your check clears."



NATIONAL BASKETBALL PLAYERS ASSOCIATION

Dear Prospective Agent:

Thank you for your recent letter inquiring about information on becoming a certified agent with the National Basketball Players Association. Please complete the enclosed application and return it to our offices to the attention my assistant Legencia Ten. All applicants must submit a copy of your highest academic transcript or a copy of a transcript with your application. Additionally, it will delay the processing of your application. (Each question must be answered in order for us to fully evaluate your credentials.)

Every agent is required to pay annual dues in the amount of \$1,500.00. Dues are applied on a per season (July 1 - June 30*) basis. These monies, in the form of a check or money order, are due and payable upon receipt of your application. If you are applying after January 1st, you will be required to pay the \$175.00 processing fee. Your application will be required to pay next year's dues on or before July 1* of each and every year thereafter.

If you have any questions regarding the enclosed application or the NBPA Regulations Governing Player Agents, please do not hesitate to contact our offices.

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2

FIND YOUR CLIENTS

The paperwork is behind you. Now, it's time to survey the playing field. That's if you can even get yourself onto the playing field, Skippy. The numbers are enough to scare you right back to business school—if you went to business school, which, by the way, isn't a prerequisite for becoming an NBA agent.

At the end of this NBA season, according to official rosters, there were 414 active players in the NBA (not counting players in the minor leagues or overseas). According to the most recent NBPA guidebook, there were 313 registered agents. If players were evenly distributed, each agent would have 1.32 clients. Alas, you're in the wrong business if you're looking for even distribution. The 12 biggest

At the end of this season:

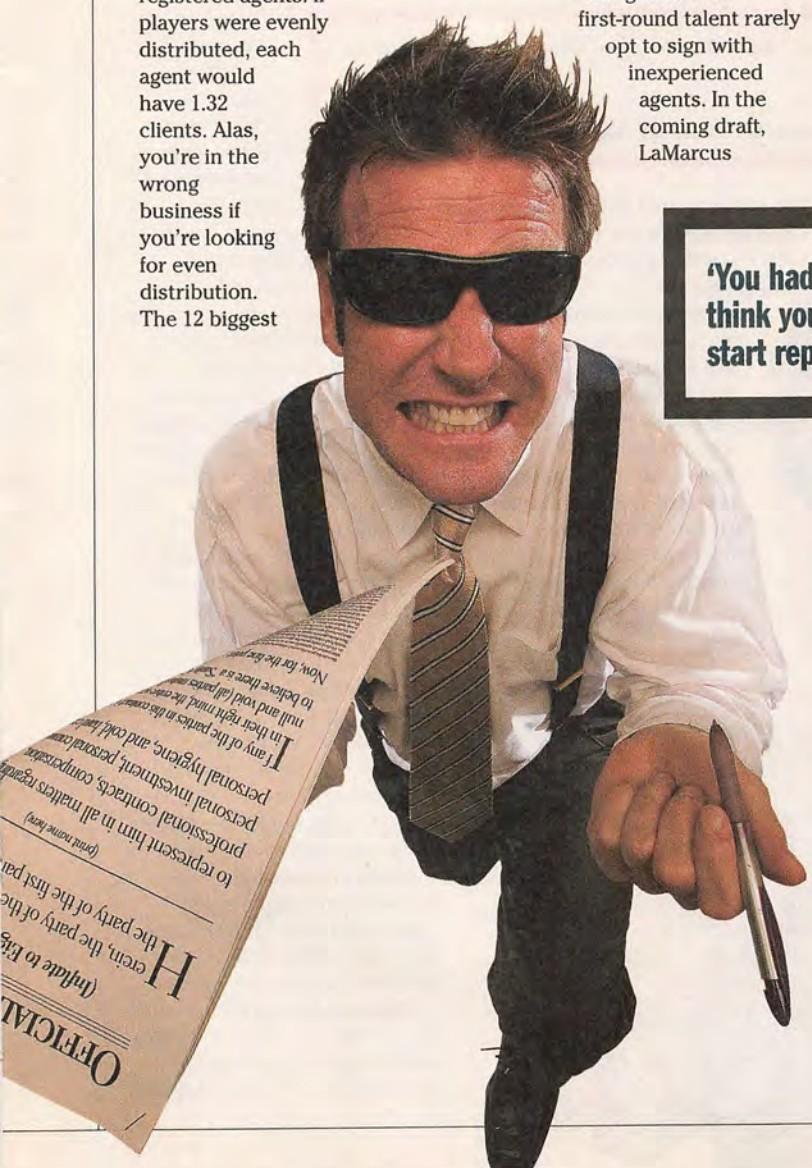
414 active NBA players

313 registered agents

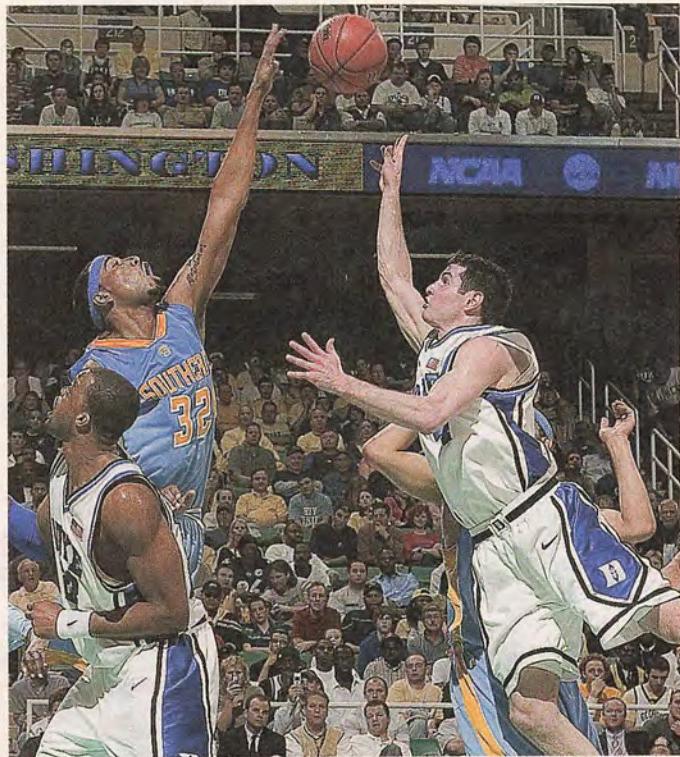
agencies represent 255 players, or 61.6 percent of the league. The five biggest represent 147 players, or 35.5 percent of the league.

New York-based Marc Cornstein, who specializes in European players, says, "You had better find a niche. Don't think you are going to come in and start representing lottery picks."

Youngsters with first-round talent rarely opt to sign with inexperienced agents. In the coming draft, LaMarcus



'You had better find a niche. Don't think you are going to come in and start representing lottery picks.'



BOB LEVERONE / SNN

Tellem might have to work a little harder given Redick's recent DWI arrest.



CHRIS COVATTA / NBAE / GETTY IMAGES

Aldridge, J.J. Redick, Shelden Williams and Brandon Roy—all likely lottery picks—have signed with Tellem's company. Adam Morrison, a certain top five pick, is with Mark Bartelstein. Duffy has point guards Rajon Rondo and Marcus Williams—probable lottery picks—plus first-round hopefuls Allan Ray and Paul Davis. Octagon scooped up Rudy Gay and Rodney Carney, two other likely lottery picks. The rich will get richer, Skippy.

In fact, almost all of the best players in the draft belong to the agent world's heavies. In the past five drafts there have been 67 lottery picks, and 17 of those went to SFX. (That company was Tellem's employer until he left in January. His departure is causing problems for SFX, which likely will not have a lottery pick in this draft and may not have a

first-round pick at all.) Duffy is next, with six lottery picks. Thomas and Dan Fegan each have had four, and Billy Ceisler, Leon Rose and Lon Babby have had three apiece. That means 59.7 percent of the lottery picks have gone through seven agencies.

3

So you wanna be an **NBA AGENT?****KNOW THE RULES**

Along with your application, you will receive a 13-page section called "NBPA Regulations Governing Player Agents." There are other rules involving your duties as an agent—the NCAA has regulations, and 40 states have laws governing sports agents. But the rules outlined in this document make clear that, as a registered agent, you are working as a representative for the union on behalf of players and that you are accountable to the union.

It also makes clear, particularly in Section 3B, what conduct is prohibited and subject to discipline. Among other rules, an agent is prohibited from:

- Providing monetary inducement to any player to encourage that player to utilize his services.

- Providing monetary inducement to any member of a player's family or any other person to encourage that player to utilize his services.

- Engaging in conduct involving dishonesty, fraud, deceit or any conduct that reflects adversely on his fitness as a player agent.

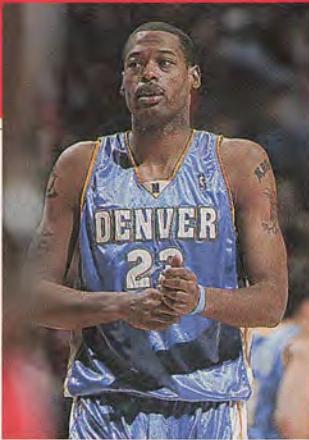
Now, now, relax, Skippy. These rules are, shall we say, loose. Or, as one agent says, "A joke. I don't know why there's a rulebook at all."

Take Sections 3Bf and 3Bg, for example. The first prohibits "representing the general manager or coach of any NBA team ... in matters pertaining to his employment." The second prohibits "engaging in any other activity which creates an actual or potential conflict of interest." It's a bit odd, then, that there

was no problem with Keith Glass client and former Rutgers guard Quincy Doubay working out for the Knicks in May—a workout that was overseen by coach Larry Brown, who is a client of Joe Glass, Keith's father. Doubay also worked out for the Bulls, coached by Scott Skiles, who is Keith Glass' client. Flouting of the rules on coaches and conflicts of interest is common—agent Mark Termini represents Pistons head coach Flip Saunders (and assistant Ron

Harper) but also represents about a half-dozen players, including draft candidate Mike Gansey.

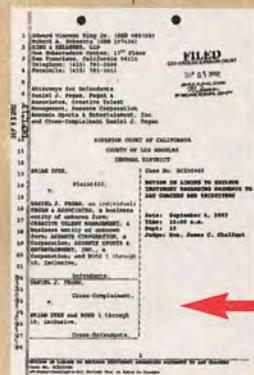
See, the rules are not taken too seriously. In fact, bad things can happen when you try to play by them. Veteran agent Darren Weiner had only recently started his practice in 1994 when he met a talented freshman at the University of Massachusetts named Marcus Camby. Weiner limited his contact with Camby, though. "I feel when you recruit kids, you should give them space to be a kid and not constantly call them directly," Weiner says. "If you work hard to get to know



BOB LEVERONE / SN

Camby's college looked high and low—real low—in helping him find an agent.

But everything changed when Camby was a junior and it became clear he'd be leaving for the NBA. Weiner was approached by Dave Glover, an assistant to the UMass athletic director who asked Weiner which player



Q. Okay. And why do you think that Dan paid

Irvin?

A. Because he told me he did.

The agent world is cutthroat. Think long and hard about what you say ... it could show up in a lawsuit and then in a national magazine.

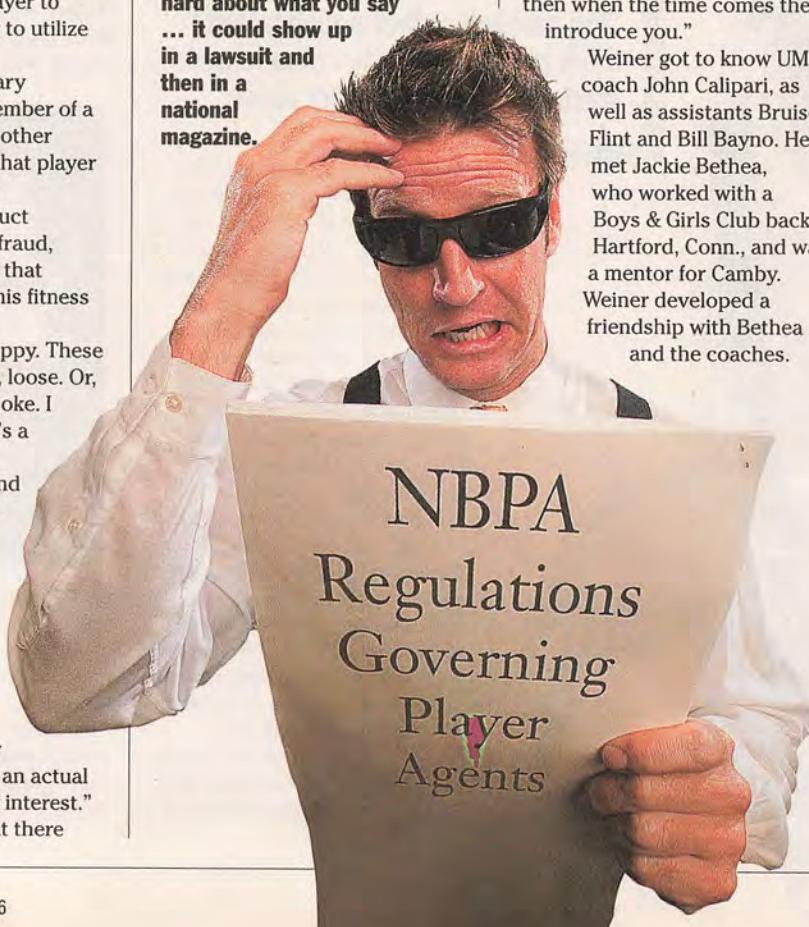
the adults around the kid and let them know what you're all about, then when the time comes they'll introduce you."

Weiner got to know UMass coach John Calipari, as well as assistants Bruiser Flint and Bill Bayno. He met Jackie Bethea, who worked with a Boys & Girls Club back in Hartford, Conn., and was a mentor for Camby. Weiner developed a friendship with Bethea and the coaches.

he was looking to represent. When Weiner responded with Camby's name, Glover told Weiner he'd be better off pursuing lesser prospects Donta Bright and Dana Dingle. Glover informed Weiner that the university had implemented a registration program for agents looking to represent Camby, and if Weiner still wanted to pursue Camby he'd have to file an application.

Weiner filed the application but never received verification. Once Glover took over the process, smaller agents were bumped out in favor of big names such as Tellem, Eric Fleisher and Tony Dutt (then with ProServ). Weiner was certain the cause was lost after the university sent out a notice saying Camby would be off-limits to agents once the conference tournament started. But after one conference tournament game, Weiner saw Glover, Camby, Dutt and Dutt's associate, Alex Johnson, chatting at the arena.

The agent-finding process at UMass was later revealed to be a fiasco—Camby admitted to taking money, gifts and, allegedly,



the services of prostitutes from agents, which left the university in hot water. But Camby signed with ProServ, though he now is represented by Richard Kaplan. "I was young and inexperienced," Weiner says. "Marcus was the player of the year, and the fact is you're not going to get every client you go after. Did I have a real shot at him? Maybe and maybe not. I know I had no shot once Dave Glover and the university got involved."

You don't have to break the rules to get your agency started. Just massage them. The rules say you can't offer money to a player or his family, but the rules say nothing about giving jobs to key people close to players.

When Houston-based Bob McLaren, a former executive with the Astros, wanted to get into representing NBA players last year, he hired Tommy Thomas, the longtime coach at The Colony High School in north Texas. Made sense; two alums of The Colony, Deron Williams and Bracey Wright, were juniors in college (Williams at Illinois and Wright at Indiana). Both were heading into that year's draft. Little surprise, then, that McLaren's first two clients were Williams and Wright.

Sound fishy? It's all within the rules. And it is common practice. Duffy hired Calvin Andrews, who had been Drew Gooden's AAU coach. And now Duffy and Andrews, a certified agent, represent Gooden. But Andrews has been valuable beyond his connection with Gooden. He also brought Carmelo Anthony, Kareem Rush and Marcus Williams (among others) into the company. The same thing happened when Tellem brought AAU coach Thad Foucher—who coached Jonathan Bender's New Orleans Jazz AAU team—into his company. Tellem got Bender, but

Foucher later brought in players such as Joe Johnson and Dahntay Jones.

But, hey, if the rulebook isn't for you, you still can be an NBA agent. Just get yourself some piles of cash and a few FedEx envelopes. It seems to have worked for Fegan,



according to a former employer.

Fegan is one of the league's most powerful agents and has a client list made up of several players who sport eight-figure contracts, including Gilbert Arenas, Erick Dampier, Shawn Marion, Troy Murphy and Jason Richardson.

In 2002, Fegan's former associate, Brian Dyke, filed a lawsuit in Los Angeles Superior Court over the sale of Fegan's business to Canadian conglomerate Assante.

Dyke alleged that Fegan broke promises and froze him out of the deal. The case was settled out of court and Dyke dropped the lawsuit, but the allegations in Dyke's deposition were

fascinating. He named four AAU representatives—Foucher, Chicago's Michael Irvin, Michigan's Chris Grier and Fresno's Darren Matsubara—who, he claimed, were paid by Fegan.

Dyke was asked if he thought Fegan had paid Irvin compensation in order to sign Marion. "Yes," Dyke said. When asked why he thought that, Dyke said, "Because he told me he did."

The best sequence of the deposition starts on page 212. Dyke's lawyer asked about the payments Fegan allegedly made and labeled them "brown bag payments" made directly to the coaches, not as donations to the AAU programs.

Q. How do you know that when he said he

was making payments he wasn't referring to making an AAU donation?

A. Because I think if you're making an AAU donation you wouldn't be sending it in a FedEx envelope in cash to someone's house.

Q. Did you see him FedEx envelopes in cash to someone's house?

A. Yeah.

Q. When did you see a FedEx envelope in cash to someone's house?

A. He sent Chris Grier cash.

Q. When was that?

A. That would have been 2000 also.

Q. How much cash?

A. I don't know how much it was.

Q. Do you have any ballpark?

A. It was over \$1,000.

The players association never punished Fegan. Again, Skippy, you should know the rules. Just don't worry about them too much.

4 AGENT, BEWARE

However you manage to get yourself a client or two, remember that the wise agent remains on his toes. That's because it's very easy for players to drop an agent and pick up a new one—the player simply must file an official termination letter with the union and wait 15 days. Just like that, you're gone. "You learn to live in fear of the fax," one agent says. "Every time the fax starts going, you think, 'Am I getting fired?'"

Peruse the pages of the 2001 agent's handbook. Then look at the 2005 book and you can see there is cause for such paranoia—during that four-year span, 70 of the 233 players (30.0 percent) listed in both books changed agents. Look at Mavericks guard Jason Terry, for example. He entered the 1999 draft with Larry Fox as his agent and just weeks later switched to No Limit Sports, the company started by rapper Master P. He left No Limit and signed with agent Brad Marshall in 2001. Terry dropped him within a few months, which led Marshall to file a grievance with the union over a \$200,000 loan he had given Terry. In 2003, Terry was a Raymond Brothers client. That year, Brothers negotiated Terry's three-year, \$22.5 million contract. Terry, who will be one of the NBA's top free agents this summer, is currently represented by Fegan. For now, at least.

Players change agents like tube socks, which means that threats to your practice lurk everywhere. So, Skippy, beware ...

'You learn to live in fear of the fax. Every time the fax starts going, you think, "Am I getting fired?"'

... of runners

The biggest danger an agent faces is clients' being stolen or "poached." Runners often are the culprits. Many agencies have employees who are not certified agents and, thus, are out of the jurisdiction of the union. These are runners, and their goal is to hammer players with a consistent message: "Drop your agent, join up

So you wanna be an **NBA AGENT?**

with us, and we'll take better care of you."

Runners are everywhere. They are at late-night clubs frequented by players. They are given family passes by NBA teams (who get the requests from players). They haunt gyms in the offseason. One agent says he discovered a runner had paid a popular barber to introduce the runner to players who frequent the barber's shop. There are no restrictions on runners in the NBA—by contrast, the NFL Players Association is more diligent—which means that if you can't be with your client round-the-clock that client certainly will be approached by a runner.

"It's a mess," an agent says. "There is no regulation. The problem is you have a new group of players coming in every year, and every year these runners can just reinvent themselves and tell players whatever they want to hear. In the corporate world, you have a resume and a background and a reputation. In this world, you can just lie, just say whatever you think the guy wants to hear."

... of players

Agent Keith Kreiter first signed a deal with point guard Rafer Alston—a veteran of Rucker Park, Fresno State and the Fresno County Jail (thanks to a 90-day sentence stemming from a domestic violence arrest)—in early 1999. Alston had been drafted in the second round by the Bucks, and Kreiter had been working with then-Vikings receiver Randy Moss on image repair. Alston saw the success Kreiter had with Moss and hired Kreiter. Five years, three leagues, five teams, a lot of sweat and, finally, a termination letter followed.

Alston started with the CBA's Idaho franchise in 1999, and that offseason he moved into Kreiter's house. Kreiter worked with the Bucks on a guaranteed deal—he finally got one, a two-year contract with a large portion of the first year guaranteed. He also managed a deal with And1, the shoe company, by using old tapes of Alston to start the And1 mix-tape concept.

But still it was a challenge to keep Alston in the NBA. When the Bucks opted not to re-sign Alston

THREE TO FEAR

If you see any of these runners canoodling with your client, take action ... immediately.

William Wesley "Worldwide Wes" transcends the runner label. He is a behind-the-scenes wheeler-dealer known for bringing in big game, and he is one of the league's most powerful men. Wesley steers clients to his personal attorney, agent Leon Rose. (Wesley was instrumental in turning LeBron James from an Aaron Goodwin client to a Rose client last year.)

Eddie Lau A former high school player who was befriended by ex-NBA All-Star Jayson Williams, Lau is a major presence on the AAU scene in New York—especially with the Long Island Panthers. He has been connected with agent Dan Fegan.

Reggie Brown Known for his persistence in flipping players to powerful Chicago agent Mark Bartelstein, Brown is a regular at the United Center and at the West Loop Athletic Club, the home gym of renowned trainer Tim Grover. One agent says that at the 2004 All-Star Game in Los Angeles he grew so fed up with Brown's approaches to his clients that he told Brown, "We're adults, and I can't believe I have to say this, but if you don't stay away from my guy I'm going to have to kick your ass."

in 2002, Kreiter again had to scramble. He told Alston to prove his talent—despite Alston's objections—in the developmental league. Kreiter was right. Alston averaged 15.8 points, and after just six games the Raptors signed him. That summer, Kreiter steered Alston to Miami for an increase in playing time. Alston had his breakout season with the Heat, averaging 10.2 points and 4.5 assists.

And that's when Eddie Lau, a reputed runner who had known Alston from their days in New York, and Fegan got involved. Alston was a free agent, and despite Kreiter's sacrifices Alston terminated Kreiter and hired Fegan just before signing a big contract with the Raptors.

There's an important lesson here, though, Skippy: Don't sink too much into one guy. Kreiter since has expanded his practice worldwide—he represents

basketball players such as Maciej Lampe, Kendall Gill and Orien Greene—and the new revenue outweighs Alston's contract. As a bonus, Kreiter did not have to deal with the bizarre, headache-ridden year Alston had in Toronto in 2004-05.

"You work hard to put your player in a good situation in which he thrives; logic would suggest loyalty follows," says Kreiter, who says he bears no ill will toward Alston. "Clearly the agent business and logic aren't always synonymous."

In fact, it works the other way too often. "Our business is littered with unscrupulous agents who prey on players' impressionable minds," Kreiter says. "I have a friend in the business who tells a great story about one of his players' toasting him at his wedding. The player fired him by the time he returned home from his honeymoon."



7. In or about the summer of 1994, Marc Fleisher made a decision to throw

a fortieth birthday party for himself at the Florida home of Donald Trump, Mar-A-Lago.

17. On numerous occasions, rather than conduct the business of Entersport

during business hours, Marc Fleisher simply closed his office door and went to sleep on his couch.

Who needs George Costanza's under-the-desk bed when you have a couch and a door?

... of partners

In the mixed-up world of the NBA agent, the saying goes, "Keep your enemies distant and your friends even distant-er." Or something like that.

Rare is the lasting partnership. Two of the league's top agents, Duffy and Goodwin, were partners in the early 1990s before a bitter breakup. After seven years with SFX, Tellem left and now is part of the smaller Wasserman Media Group. Those were high-profile divorces, and perhaps the lesson is that agents simply should not operate in pairs. But you'd think you could work with your own brother, right?

Funny you should ask. That brings us to the saga of the Fleisher brothers, Eric and Marc. Theirs is a big name in the player representation field because their father, Larry Fleisher, was a founder of the players association, the guy who facilitated the ABA-NBA merger, negotiated the league's salary cap, created the NBA's very tough antidrug rules and helped spread the game globally. It seemed only natural Eric and Marc would form an NBA player agency, called Entersport.

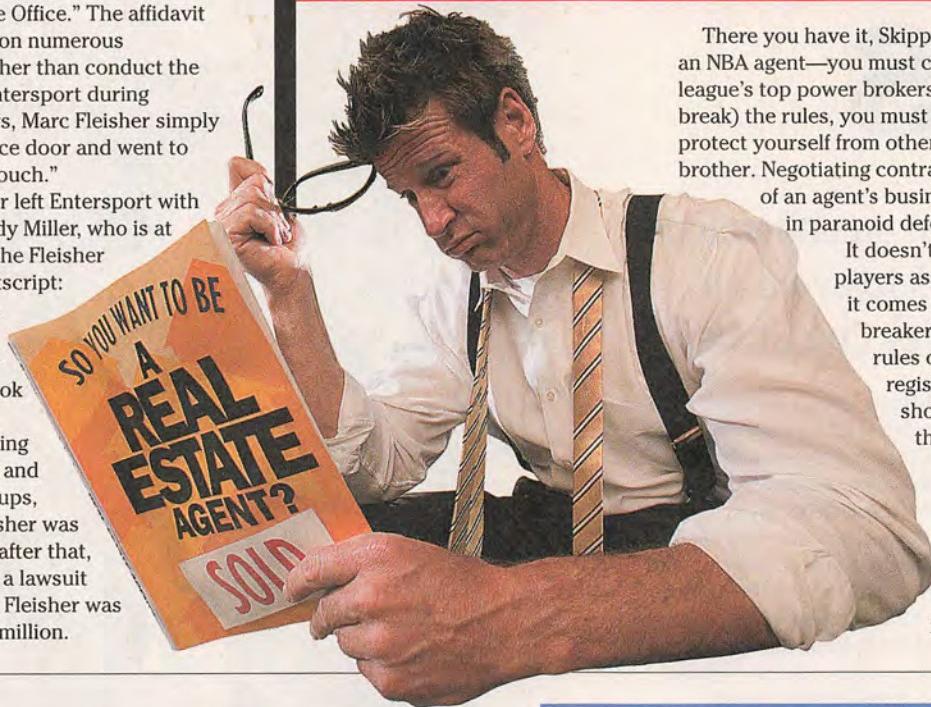
In 1995, though, Eric and Marc ran Larry Fleisher's good name through the wringer. It was then that Eric, claiming irreconcilable differences that mostly centered on Marc's work ethic, sued Entersport and Marc. The lawsuit is embarrassing. On page 3 of Eric Fleisher's affidavit, there is a section titled "Marc Fleisher's Waste of Corporate Assets." A subsection is titled, "The 40th Birthday Party," which alleges that, in 1994, Marc spent company time and money planning his birthday celebration at Donald Trump's Florida home. Another subsection is "The Wedding in Acapulco," which is similar to the

40th birthday party—except Eric points out Marc planned the wedding for the weekend of the 1993 Final Four, which is an important time for agents who are recruiting.

The clincher, though, is Subsection D: "Marc Fleisher Sleeping at the Office." The affidavit charges that "on numerous occasions, rather than conduct the business of Entersport during business hours, Marc Fleisher simply closed his office door and went to sleep on his couch."

Eric Fleisher left Entersport with his intern, Andy Miller, who is at the center of the Fleisher brothers' postscript: Miller left Eric Fleisher's new company in 1999 and took several big clients, including Kevin Garnett and Chauncey Billups, with him. Fleisher was back in court after that, this time with a lawsuit against Miller. Fleisher was awarded \$4.6 million.

5 STILL WANNA BE AN NBA AGENT?



There you have it, Skippy. That's what it really takes to be an NBA agent—you must crack through the dominance of the league's top power brokers to get a client, you must bend (or break) the rules, you must fend off runners and you must protect yourself from other agents and partners, maybe your brother. Negotiating contracts is a small, relatively easy slice of an agent's business. The rest of your time is spent in paranoid defense of your turf.

It doesn't need to be this way, of course. The players association should get tougher when it comes to investigating and punishing rule-breakers. The union should tighten the rules on runners by forcing agents to register their runners. NBA teams should stop giving runners access to the tunnels outside the locker room.

Major changes, though, are not likely, which is going to mean the agent business will continue to be a brutal line of work. Says one agent, with a pause: "If I could do it all over again? I'd go into f— real estate."

SN

So, you wanna hire an agent?

A lot can go wrong after you decide you want to be an NBA agent. But just imagine how hard it is to choose an agent. So what should players do?

The NCAA annually distributes a list of useful questions the athlete should ask potential agents, and individual leagues and schools supplement those lists.

What is the agent's fee structure?

NBA agents get a standard 4 percent fee on most contracts, but some have been known to charge user's sums for financial planning and endorsements. And always look into the possibility of paying your agent an hourly rate rather than a percentage.

Can the agent provide a list of clients and their phone numbers—including clients lost?

Talk to other clients. Find out if the agent gives personal attention and keeps in regular contact. Find out how the agent handles the draft, free agents and difficult situations. And ask why former clients left.

What has the agent done for retired clients?

Some agents quickly drop retired clients. Make sure the agent you hire has a plan for your retirement—and talk to retired players he has helped.

Has the agent offered payments?

A player who needs short-term cash should only trust an agent who helps him get a bank loan—not one who gives him money directly. If the way they offer money is against the rules, be skeptical. As Princeton's agent guide for student-athletes warns: "If this person is willing to cheat others openly, what will stop him or her from cheating you?" —S.D.

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NHL

No bit parts

Big contributions from an unheralded line allowed the Oilers to avoid an early exit in the Stanley Cup finals

Remember the Oilers' dynasty years, when Wayne Gretzky and Mark Messier headlined a fleet of future Hall of Famers and Edmonton won five Stanley Cups in seven years?

Too often forgotten is the last of those seasons. Gretzky was gone and the franchise was beginning to unravel, making the 1990 Oilers a Cinderella team. To win that season, the Oilers got unexpected contributions from a Kid Line of Adam Graves, Joe Murphy and Martin Gelinas.

In forcing the 2006 Stanley Cup finals to seven games, this season's Oilers got no less of a lift from the line of Michael Peca, Raffi Torres and Fernando Pisani.

Not that we shouldn't have expected that. No team this season exceeded expectations more completely than the Oilers.

Peca, the known commodity, was "the straw that stirs the drink with the other two," coach Craig MacTavish says, adding: "He's a very skilled guy at the absolute top of his game." Twice chosen the

NHL's top defensive forward, Peca came to Edmonton in August after a bad experience with the Islanders. Rumors flew about Peca's allegedly divisive attitude, especially concerning his coach—Peter Laviolette, who now coaches the Hurricanes.

With Edmonton, Peca returned to being a unifying force and overcame a dreadful regular season with his playoff contributions.

Torres, another Islanders castoff who was acquired in a 2003 trade, provided the line's explosive power. His hit on Hurricanes defenseman Aaron Ward set the tone for Game 5.

And Torres was part of the sandwich collision later in that game that sent Hurricanes center Doug Weight packing and forced them to call injured power forward Erik Cole back into action.

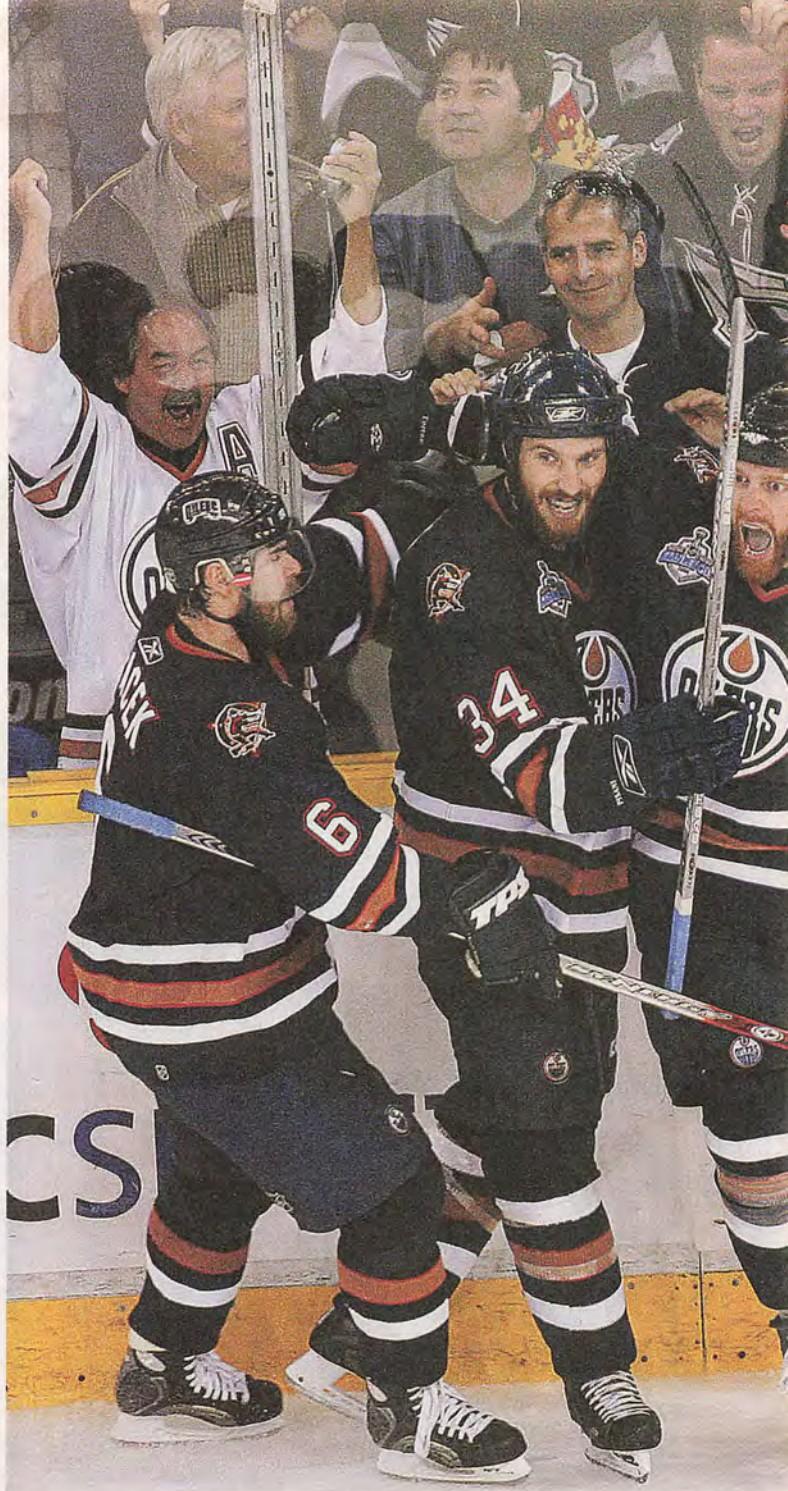
But the real stunner in the Oilers' run was Pisani. Trot out the corny local-boy-makes-good story line because Pisani is from Edmonton's Little Italy section. He stole the spotlight from other

Prying open the jaws of defeat

Already the only eighth seed to reach the finals since the current playoff system was established in 1994, the Oilers were the sixth team to force a Game 7 after rallying from a 3-1 deficit. The others:

- 1942 Toronto Maple Leafs**
- 1945 Detroit Red Wings**
- 1954 Montreal Canadiens**
- 1987 Philadelphia Flyers**
- 1994 Vancouver Canucks**

The Leafs were down, 3-0, before winning the final four games against the Red Wings. The other teams all lost in Game 7.



Alberta natives in the finals, including Hurricanes goalie Cam Ward.

It wouldn't be a stretch to say Pisani was responsible for the Oilers' reaching Game 7. He scored twice in Game 5, when the Oilers were down 3-1 in the series, on the road and facing elimination. He scored early on a deflection and closed with the first game-winning shorthanded goal in finals history. And in Game 6 Pisani got the game's first goal again.

An offensive force and

Coming back from playoff dead gave the Oilers plenty to celebrate, whether in packs or with some one-on-one time.



PAUL CHIASSON / AP



RYAN REMORZ / AP

game-changer? Who knew? After all, Pisani had a mediocre 18 goals in the regular season. His Game 6 goal on the Oilers' resurrected power play gave him 13 for the playoffs. "It seems like I'm in the right spot at the right time in those situations, and the puck just happens to go in," Pisani says.

Other players were prominent in Conn Smythe Trophy consideration as MVP of the playoffs, but Pisani may have been most deserving of the most deserving of the award.

SN

Already ringing in the new year

The playoffs are over, but teams haven't been idle with two crucial events coming up: the entry draft and the free-agent signing period.

The days before Saturday's draft in Vancouver figure to be filled with trades and rumors. Possibilities abound, but let's start with these two:

■ The Blues hold the No. 1 overall pick, but would they trade it? For a franchise desperate for a PR bonanza, it's a huge question. They appeared to be casting loving glances at defenseman Erik Johnson, an American who's the top-ranked prospect. But they also need a bushel of talent to become competitive. If that isn't quandry enough, the team is in the final stages of ownership changes and upper management restructuring.

■ Will the Penguins try to get the top pick? Maybe, but another intriguing option would be to deal the No. 2 pick to the Hurricanes for Jack Johnson, a defenseman who was Penguins star Sidney Crosby's bodyguard in juniors. Johnson disappointed the Hurricanes by not going pro this season. Carolina could use the pick to get forward Jordan Staal, brother of star center Eric Staal.

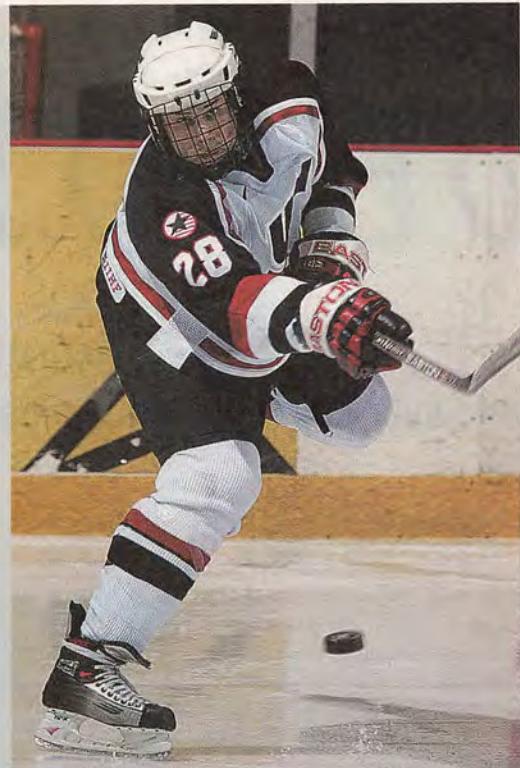
As for the free-agent period, which begins July 1, teams must make moves to fit under the salary cap, which is expected to be about \$43 million. The Oilers and Hurricanes each have nine players who could become unrestricted free agents. Teams also must satisfy restricted free agents looking for raises.

In the big picture, teams' long-term goals and short-term financial issues clash like the earth's tectonic plates. NHL general managers remain neophytes as the process enters its second go-round. So it's instructive to look to the NFL for advice—something a number of hockey execs do.

Consider the thoughts of some NFL agents.

"Teams find that they can't sign everybody, and they must make decisions about their core players," says Jim Steiner of SFX Sports Group. That requires "an eye for today and a vision for the future. They can't become overzealous or try to improve faster than they can afford to," he says.

Michael Huyghue of Axcess Sports & Entertainment says teams should "put a greater emphasis on priorities and developing players because that's what the cap forces you to do." Salary caps mean constant turnover,



JIM MCISAAC / GETTY IMAGES

As the mating season that is the draft beckons, the Blues have eyes for Erik Johnson (above), and the Hurricanes could be smitten with Jordan Staal.

so affordable replacements must be available.

The kicker? This is a long-term approach in a business that demands immediate returns, and management changes can push years of planning into the recycling bin.

Peter Schaffer of All Pro Sports and Entertainment suggests teams should spend more in

years when they have a chance to win. The Oilers and Hurricanes mortgaged their futures by trading picks and prospects for veterans. "If you have a player that might become your next Joe Sakic and you trade him for someone you need to win now, that's a calculated risk," Schaffer says. Think boom or bust.

The NFL and NHL collective bargaining agreements are too dissimilar to allow direct comparisons, but the pattern is clear: Go for it if you think you can win, but be prepared to pay a steep price down the road.



DAVE SANDFORD / GETTY IMAGES

A rare playoff tradition

Oilers fans established a playoff tradition this year by tossing a chunk of raw beef onto the ice at home games. Think of it as Detroit's octopus meets Alberta's cattle country. Blame it on two Edmonton radio personalities who chucked steaks onto the rink before the Oilers' playoff debut. After that, someone steered a slab over the boards almost every game.

The act is forbidden; of course, so is the octopus pitch. But there are ground rules. Graham Hicks of the *Edmonton Sun* suggests the cuts be "beautifully tossed. Not so as to hit anybody, but to land close by the opposing players. A reminder that they are in the land of Alberta beef."

If sticking sirloin in your shorts sounds gross, remember: It can't be worse than octopus.

DECODING THE

GET A CLUE! Actually, get 14 of 'em to decipher 2006's most misunderstood division—plus one more to get you started on 2007. *By Bob Hille*

Out here, way out here, the mountains are a backdrop, swimming pools sit beyond the right-center field fence and the ocean is just a traffic jam away. Out here, the 1-hole hitters are wheeling, the G.M.s are dealing and a manager is apt to talk as if it were the Old West, not the National League West.

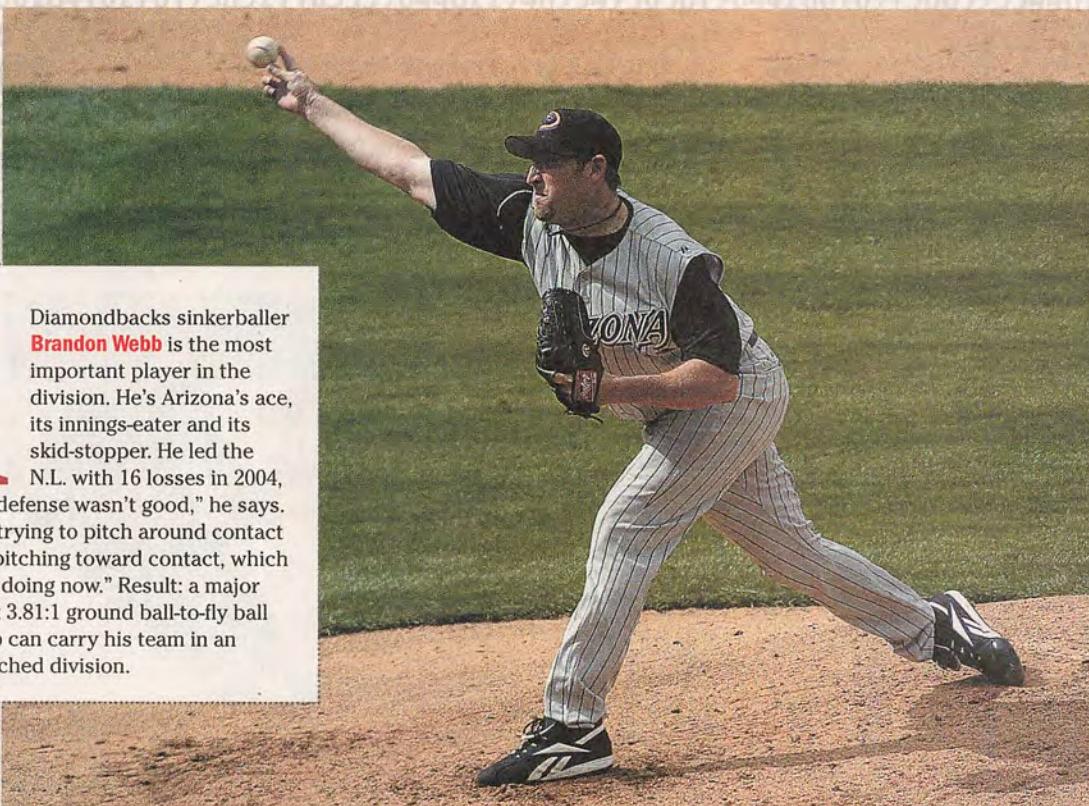
And that old saw, the one about how "the champion finished below .500" last year? Well, that's accurate only if you include the 82-80 Padres' being swept in the '05 playoffs. And though this year's champion will be near .500 again, don't be fooled.

"Every team upgraded," Diamondbacks catcher Johnny Estrada says.

The West will beat up on itself, but it began the week with every team at least .500 and with a 96-86 record against the other N.L. divisions. "I said even before we started that I thought this was going to be the most balanced division in baseball," Padres manager Bruce Bochy says.

Out here, way out here in the N.L. West, things are wide-open. It's a division deeper than Steinbrenner's pockets and tighter than David Glass'. Improved and evenly matched? You bet. Easy to figure, with more than three months to go? Hardly.

We offer a few clues—14—to help you figure out how this whole thing will shake down and one to grow on heading into next year.



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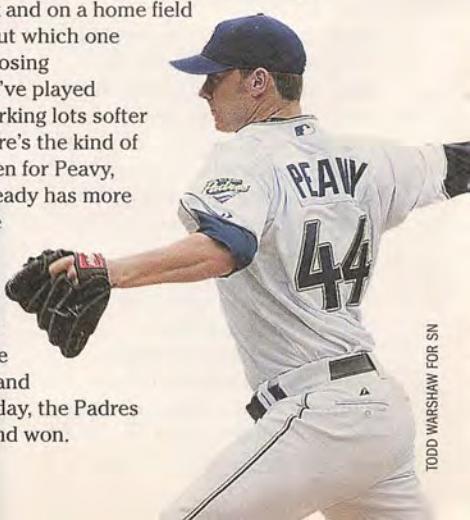
Diamondbacks sinkerballer **Brandon Webb** is the most important player in the division. He's Arizona's ace, its innings-eater and its skid-stopper. He led the N.L. with 16 losses in 2004, when "the defense wasn't good," he says. "I was just trying to pitch around contact instead of pitching toward contact, which is what I'm doing now." Result: a major league-best 3.81:1 ground ball-to-fly ball ratio. Webb can carry his team in an evenly matched division.

2 First-year general managers have made an instant impact. The Dodgers' Ned Colletti negotiated multimillion-dollar deals (Nomar Garciaparra, Rafael Furcal, et al.) and signed low-cost free agents (notably, pitchers Aaron Sele, Takashi Saito and Joe Beimel). Those merely complemented his best moves: picking the A's pocket by getting outfielder Andre Ethier for mercurial Milton Bradley and, more important, not blocking the way for youngsters such as Ethier, outfielder Matt Kemp, catcher Russell Martin and righthander Jonathon Broxton. And more kids with talent are on the way.

The Diamondbacks' Josh Byrnes inherited a team that needed to upgrade the outfield and improve the infield defense. So he signed outfielder Eric Byrnes and traded for second baseman Orlando Hudson, who with shortstop Craig Counsell has helped Arizona turn 82 double plays, the second-most in the majors. (Webb has noticed.)

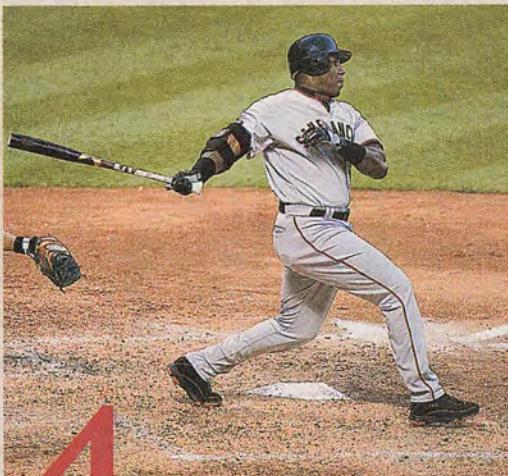
3 **Jake Peavy** is the Padres' Webb, except Peavy has pitched in pain and with poor luck and on a home field about which one opposing

player says, "I've played stickball in parking lots softer than that." Here's the kind of year it has been for Peavy, who at 4-8 already has more losses than he did all last season, when he won 13 games: In one start, he struck out 16 and lost; the next day, the Padres got two hits and won.



TODD WARSHAW FOR SN

N.L. West



ROBERT SEALE / SN

4 The Giants won't be healthy enough (translation: have enough juice at the plate) to contend to the end. Try this stat on for size, courtesy of the *San Francisco Chronicle*: Since San Fran signed Moises Alou before the 2005 season, he and **Barry Bonds** have been in the lineup together 29 times in 230 games. The Giants are 13-8 with both Bonds and Alou in the lineup this season.

5 Speaking of Bonds, Arizona was winless in its first six games after the feds ousted reliever Jason Grimsley. The key? In the six losses, the Diamondbacks were outscored, 14-1, in first innings.

6 Speaking of injuries—quick, read this stat before one of them gets hurt: Injury-prone **J.D. Drew** and Garciaparra have played in 58 and 49 of the Dodgers' 68 games. One or the other leads the team in batting, RBIs, homers and on-base percentage, and they're two big reasons the team leads the league in runs and batting average.



JOHN CORDES FOR SN

7 The injury that will haunt the Dodgers most is the one to closer Eric Gagne's elbow. His velocity was down from 99 mph to 93 mph, and an anti-inflammatory regimen was ineffective. He's back on the D.L. and his future availability can't be predicted, so the bullpen is in upheaval. The main fill-in options are Danys Baez, who leads the league with six blown saves, and Saito, a rookie who is 4-for-4 in save chances.

Sizing up the field

Almost halfway home, we've gotten a pretty good look at the N.L. West. Still ahead: Which team will stay healthy, and which has a deadline move or two up its sleeve? Five SPORTING NEWS baseball editors rank the teams* in key categories (on a 1-5 scale, with 1 being the best):

Team	Pitching	Offense	Defense	Injuries/ health	Front office	Intangibles	Total
Dodgers	11	7	18	19	8	12	75
Padres	11	24	6	13	13	13	80
Diamondbacks	14	14	15	12	12	19	86
Rockies	16	16	12	13	17	15	89
Giants	14	18	13	16	12	17	90

*For recreational purposes; no wagering, please.

8 The Dodgers and D-backs need pitching, and because they have depth in the minors, they will be involved when the A's Barry Zito and the Marlins' Dontrelle Willis, among others, hit the trade market in July. More important, L.A. and Arizona have money to spend.

9 Point of reference, the N.L. West payrolls ...
Dodgers \$99.1 million
Giants \$90.8 million
Padres \$68.9 million
Diamondbacks \$58.9 million
Rockies \$40.8 million

10 The Rockies' evolution toward pitching and speed and away from their Blake Street Bombers roots has made the team better on the road (18-18 entering the week) but has caused trouble at home. From 1995 to 2001, they were shut out at Coors Field nine times. In a recent nine-game homestand, they were shut out twice.

11 Unless the Diamondbacks add at least one starting pitcher, they won't be good enough. Webb is 8-2 (he lowered his ERA from 2.14 to 2.06 in his first loss); the rest of the staff is 27-31. Step 1 of a makeover began last week when the team replaced disastrous Russ Ortiz, 0-5 with a 7.54 ERA in six starts, with Kevin Jarvis on a temporary basis.

12 Why do the Padres rank 15th in the N.L. in runs, a bad sign for a team hoping to defend its division title? In part because no regular is hitting better than .300, unless you count pitcher Chan Ho Park (.375).

13 Looking for speed and abandon? This division is where it's at. The Giants (28), Rockies (23) and Dodgers (23) rank 1-3 in triples, and four of the N.L.'s five individual leaders in that category play in the West.

14 July shapes up as a make-or-break month for the Diamondbacks. They open it in Oakland, then face the Dodgers seven times in an 18-day span heading toward the trading deadline.

15 Looking toward 2007? The Rockies' everyday core—Cory Sullivan, Brad Hawpe, Matt Holliday, Clint Barmes and Garrett Atkins—has done the remarkable: It has made aging, injury-prone **Todd Helton** look like a weak link. And there's more home-grown talent coming: infield superprospect Ian Stewart, 21, is the guy other teams ask for when they talk trade with G.M. Dan O'Dowd. The downside in the short term: Colorado's recent slide from first to last is more an indication of their youth than a reflection on their ability. "We didn't take ring sizes after the first six weeks," manager Clint Hurdle says. "We're not going to hang nooses from branches now."



MICHAEL McNAMARA / SN

POCKET CHANGE

NFL

VINCE YOUNG slashed, sprinted and spun his way to a pile of honors at Texas. But to excel in the NFL, he first needs to learn the pro quarterback ABCs. *By Matt Crossman*

THE NFL EDUCATION OF VINCE YOUNG IS A DAUNTING PROJECT.

He must revamp his footwork. He has to figure out how to read complex defenses, where blitzes are coming from and when to apply his free-lance skills to a structured offense. But he can't do any of that butt-naked. A few weeks ago, Young returned from a hard day of practice at the Titans' facility to an empty locker. Shoes, socks and shirts—gone, gone and gone.

Playing detective, Young quickly deduced whodunit. Not to name names, but the culprit goes by a video game name. All right, Titans cornerback Pacman Jones hid Young's stuff. Welcome to class, Vince.

THE NFL EDUCATION OF VINCE YOUNG FEATURES A WIDE ARRAY OF TEACHERS.

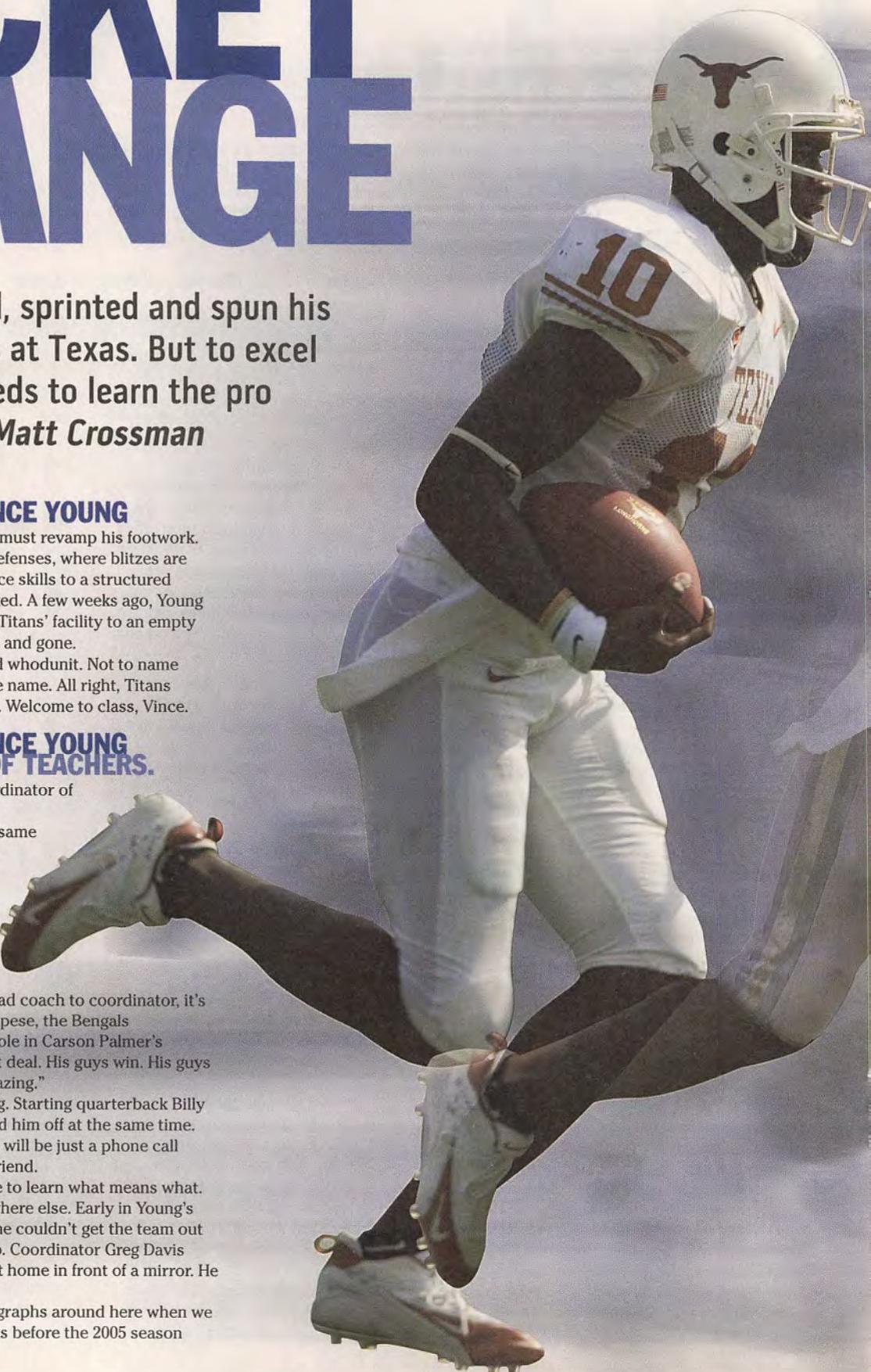
Wide receivers coach Ray Sherman, as coordinator of the Vikings, slowly brought along Daunte Culpepper, a quarterback with many of the same skills as Young. Titans coordinator Norm Chow is an alchemist who for decades has brewed impressive offenses featuring young quarterbacks. Coach Jeff Fisher proved he can mold a raw quarterback when he sat Steve McNair for the better part of two years.

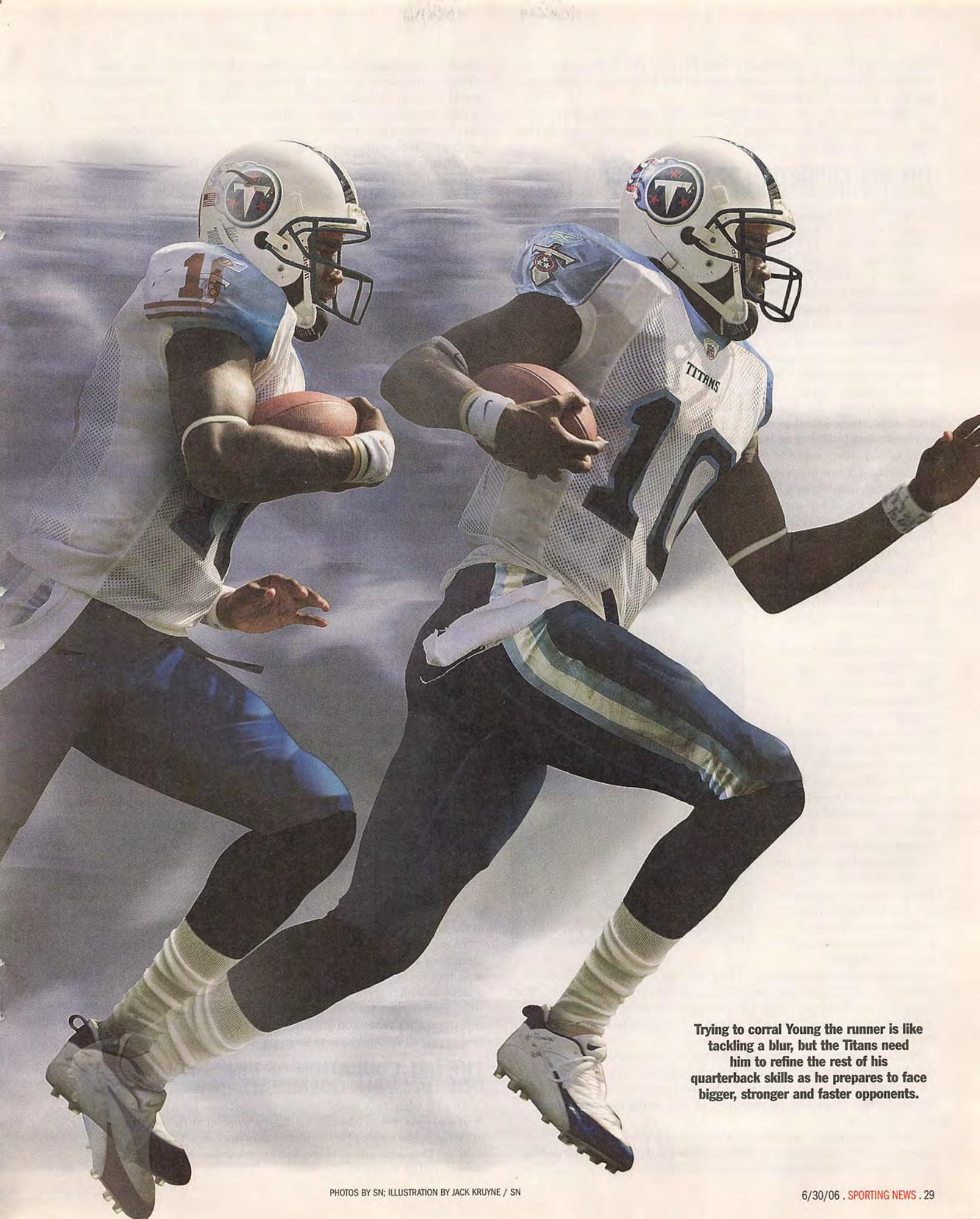
"(Young) has got great coaching; from head coach to coordinator, it's hard to find two better guys," says Ken Zampese, the Bengals' quarterbacks coach who has played a key role in Carson Palmer's development. "I admire coach Fisher a great deal. His guys win. His guys love him. And Norm Chow is absolutely amazing."

It won't only be coaches mentoring Young. Starting quarterback Billy Volek will counsel Young while trying to hold him off at the same time. New Raven McNair, a father figure to Young, will be just a phone call away. Then, of course, there is Young's girlfriend.

Quarterbacks joining a new team struggle to learn what means what. *Tango* in one place might mean *Cash* somewhere else. Early in Young's career at Texas, his play calls were so long he couldn't get the team out of the huddle fast enough. He asked for help. Coordinator Greg Davis gave him a script and told him to practice at home in front of a mirror. He did. Problem solved.

Until he got to Nashville. "We talk in paragraphs around here when we call plays," says Chow, who joined the Titans before the 2005 season





Trying to corral Young the runner is like tackling a blur, but the Titans need him to refine the rest of his quarterback skills as he prepares to face bigger, stronger and faster opponents.

after running high-octane college offenses at BYU, N.C. State and Southern California. "He told me he wanted the scripts ahead of time so he could go home and practice."

Now, in addition to practicing in front of the mirror, Young goes through plays with his girlfriend. She tells him which play to call, and he shouts it to an imaginary huddle.

THE NFL EDUCATION OF VINCE YOUNG

BRINGS UP QUESTIONS. Yikes, are there questions. Can he be a pocket passer? Should he be a pocket passer? Does he have it upstairs to be an NFL quarterback? Young is like a giant piece of marble. Maybe Michelangelo's *David* is in there; maybe it's all just pretty rock.

Before the draft, forecasters had him going first, second, third, fourth ... all the way to 18th. Tennessee took him third, but that didn't clear up the issue. Neither did the first few weeks of practice. Young is going to be a world-beater or a world-class bust.

The facts allow for both.

World-beater: He won 30 of 32 games as a starter for Texas. He almost single-handedly won the national championship, besting the unbestable Southern California. He is big, fast and insanely athletic. And those who know him say he's an even better person. He is humble, a great leader and eager to learn. The Rose Bowl showed Young is a freak athlete, and, Davis says, "He is a freak person."

World-class bust: Before becoming an NFL starter, Young needs to learn to take direct snaps from center, drop into the pocket, recognize defenses and throw properly and accurately. In other words, he needs to learn to play quarterback. He can't rely on his Goliath-sized skills as much. Says a rival assistant coach: "Can he get away from (Robert) Mathis and (Dwight) Freeney? Absolutely not. The guy in Miami, (Jason) Taylor? No chance. All the things that made him special in college will be reduced in the pros."

Titans coaches have mixed some calculus into Young's basic education. "We're going to bombard him with the way we play football, then we're going to fit that in with the stuff he does," Chow says.

With that bombardment has come rough moments. The Titans have nearly five times more plays than Young ran at Texas. He has struggled with his footwork and with learning all of the offensive formations.

"There've been some balls that have sailed over the fence and gone into the pond," Fisher says. "But that's to be expected."

In the next few weeks, the Titans will explore what Young does well and figure out how to get that into the offense. Coaches want to blend his improvisational running with more conventional dropback passing. "There are four or five times a game where you absolutely have to make a play in the pocket," says Chow. "I'm trying to convince him of that. You have got to make it, and you cannot make it running around. Once he gets that, he's going to be phenomenal. He's not there yet."

Which is not the same thing as not wanting to be there. Young's coaches rave about his teachability, work ethic and diligence. They shrug their shoulders at reports that he had a poor score on the Wonderlic test. In games and practices, he repeatedly demonstrates football smarts.

When he returned to practice last week after a week off, Young showed marked improvement with his throws and in his understanding of offensive formations and recognition of defensive schemes, which he

credits to watching tons of video at home. All that, and he has been sitting on his hands instead of raising them. At Texas, he identified his weaknesses and asked for help, and he will do that in Tennessee—but not yet. He realizes rookies should be seen and not heard. Young has a list of questions to ask when the time is right. His first will address getting blitzed on third-and-long.

"When a team sees me on that particular blitz, they see me going a particular way all the time," he says. Imagine if he could run to the left, too. Somewhere, an outside linebacker just threw up.

THE NFL EDUCATION OF VINCE YOUNG

IS ABOUT DETAILS. He understands the big picture of the position. Teammates gravitate to him because he's a natural leader. Fisher rates him a 10 out of 10 on willingness to learn and commitment. Young never will say the dog ate his homework.

With any quarterback, Chow focuses on eyes, feet and hips. Young needs to work on all three. "I was determined when I got started to go slow, and all of a sudden I was yelling at him to do a thousand things," Chow says. "It's a little bit overwhelming, but he's handled it well."

With his eyes, Young must learn not to zero in on his main target. He's learning to set his feet properly, take three- and five-step drops and step into throws instead of just swinging his leg. Young must use his hips more instead of throwing only with his arm. "He got by with that because he's such an athlete," Chow says. "We have to change that because the window in the NFL is a lot smaller."

The Titans' syllabus does not include work on Young's arm motion. Young cocks his arm at his right ear, pauses ever so briefly, then flicks the ball—which results in a low release point that could lead to a lot of his passes getting batted down. The Titans don't think that will happen because Young is 6-5 and the motion allows him to get rid of the ball faster. "A lot of people throw the ball all different ways," Young says. "As long as you get the ball to your big-time players, it doesn't matter."



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

He's No. 1 ... for now

For six years, **Billy Volek** chased Steve McNair's job. Now that Volek finally has it, Vince Young is chasing him.

"Volek is an outstanding guy for what he is," says an NFL quarterbacks coach. "He's a B-level, second-tier kind of guy but can carry it for a while. He's got savvy, he's got poise, he's got comfort in the offense."

That system will change slightly this season. Coach Jeff Fisher says the Titans will run the ball more than they throw it. "We're going to get back to old-school offense," Fisher says. —M.C.

THE NFL EDUCATION OF VINCE YOUNG

REQUIRES—ABOVE ALL ELSE—PATIENCE.

"It's just a different variable in the time and amount of studying one has to do to be successful," says Steelers quarterbacks coach Mark Whipple.

Titans coaches must not fall in love with Young's athleticism or be enticed by false impressions. "I can anticipate him making a lot of plays in the second half of preseason games," Fisher says.

Young must be patient with the whole process. After three years of studliness at Texas, it won't be easy for him to carry a clipboard. For now, he's saying and doing the right things, but training camp hasn't started and all players want to play. By the time camp ends, the coaches will have installed and refined the entire offense. Practices will feature repetition after repetition after repetition. Like a fourth-grader, Young will keep doing drills until he gets them right. Then he'll do them again.

THE NFL EDUCATION OF VINCE YOUNG

ONE DAY WILL CULMINATE IN GRADUATION.

"He'll play when he's ready," say Titans coaches—pick one, any one—over and over. Says Fisher: "That can be as soon as the opener this year or as far as the opener two or three years from now."

When that day comes, Young will hope for one thing: that Pacman doesn't hide his uniform.

3RD WIN OF THE SEASON AND
3RD WIN AT TEXAS FOR BODINE.



BODINE'S FINAL LAP VICTORY WAS AS DRAMATIC AS THEY COME. THE THOUSANDS OF SPEECHLESS FANS WILL SECOND THAT.

Todd Bodine's "never give up" attitude paid off big time as he and his No. 30 Tundra charged past Mike Skinner on the final lap to take the checkered flag. And what a final lap it was. Bodine drove around the outside of Skinner entering turn one and held off a last corner challenge to take the victory. It was the third win in Texas and third NCTS win of 2006 for Bodine and Germain Racing/Lumber Liquidators. Mike Skinner of Bill Davis Racing had plenty of people speechless as well after securing his 4th consecutive pole position and coming in second. Way to go guys. toyota.com/NCTS

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NASCAR

Girl power

Fueled by her passion for racing, **NICOLE ADDISON**—NASCAR's only female pit crew member—is gaining respect in the garage

By Kathy Sheldon

When Terry Cook's No. 10 Ford truck screeches to a halt in its pit stall, his crew goes into action just like every other. All seven guys hop over the wall, scrambling to change tires, make adjustments and fill the gas tank as quickly as possible. Except one of them isn't a guy.

Nicole Addison may be just like any other rear tire changer on race day, but she's also the first woman to go over the wall as a pit crew member on any NASCAR team.

Addison's work ethic and drive got her into racing circles in Charlotte, but a little luck helped make her part of a NASCAR pit crew.

Addison, 23, got her foot in the door the old-fashioned way: She received training and asked questions. One of her first stops after making the trip from her home in Tucson, Ariz., to Charlotte in 2004 was the Hendrick Motorsports shop, where she asked tire specialist Lisa Smokstad for advice.

"As far as being a female in motorsports goes, I just told Nicole that whatever she did, she just needed to be the best at it," Smokstad says. "I told her to learn everything she could about the area that she picked and then some."

Addison took that advice to heart and poured her effort into the program she enrolled in at PIT Instruction & Training. For eight weeks she went through physical training, drills and trials with other would-be pit crew members. After graduating, she worked with 5 OFF 5 ON Race Team Performance, which helped her get fill-in jobs with racing teams and eventually tryouts and work with the No. 16 truck team in 2005.

Here's where luck came into play. Addison had come into racing at the time NASCAR was opening its doors a little wider to women and people of color with its Drive for Diversity, an initiative to develop a pipeline of well-trained minority drivers and crew members to teams.

"After going through the pit crew program, the Drive for Diversity definitely helped me out even though they didn't pay for my training," Addison says. "They opened the door for me because of the tryouts going on and getting your name out there and the rep they have."

"My whole goal was just to make it no matter what, and I had the door slightly cracked open. They opened it the rest of the way."

Jeff Hammond, a FOX analyst and one of the founders of PIT Instruction & Training, says the Drive for Diversity offers a leg up, not a free ride, to minorities. An individual's talent and effort still matter most.

Hammond emphasizes that Addison earned the respect of her coaches and teammates by working hard. Plus, Hammond says, Addison not only has been good enough to go over the wall but also good enough to stay there. She's in her second full season on a race team. In addition to pulling lug nuts off and tightening

5 questions with Nicole Addison



How did you get into racing?

My dad, Tom, raced at the local tracks where I grew up, in Tucson, Ariz.

What's a normal week?

We work out two times a week, practice twice a week. Monday to Wednesday we're back at the shop, putting trucks together.

What are your shop duties?

I'm a mechanic. I do all the decals on the trucks. I'm also the tire specialist, so I take care of the tires for the race, and if, for example, we're going testing, I prepare the tires for that, too.

Do you ever feel lonely or isolated?

Nope. I'd prefer working with a big group of guys than a bunch of women and dealing with the cattiness.

What's your advice to women who want to get into male-dominated careers?

If it's your passion, go do it. Had I not done this, I would have kicked my own butt down the road.

them during pit stops, Addison also works as a tire specialist for the No. 10 team and as a mechanic at the shop.

"She has as much composure, as much determination, as any guy I've ever worked with or been around," Hammond says.

Dennis Connor, crew chief for the No. 10 truck, says Addison was the best candidate when he had an opening for a tire changer.

"Nicole was with the No. 16 truck all last year, and I saw she was the tire changer and had really good stops. Our pit coach had worked with her, too," Connor says. "When we had tryouts, she made fewer mistakes than the rest and did a good job."

Smokstad is glad NASCAR has a diversity program to help women such as Addison but isn't sure it needs one. She thinks the sport is unfairly criticized for having few women on racing teams.

"I just think there aren't that many women who are interested in the mechanical end," Smokstad says. "It's the same thing as when we get on the plane, and I get out my knitting. All the guys get on and they laugh at me, and there's no way I can go, 'Hey guys, you got a No. 10 needle I can borrow?' They're just not geared that way."

People in racing are geared toward helping one another. That has eliminated any feelings of uneasiness, Addison says, though appearing on shows such as *Good Morning America* can be a little strange and the competitive butterflies she felt as a cross country runner in high school still are there on race day.

"Everyone's wanting me to succeed, and everyone lends a helping hand," Addison says. "It's like having a lot of big older brothers around me all of the time. Honestly, I haven't had any negative things said. But if there were, it would just make me want to work harder."

Luck plays a small role, but it's that work ethic that has Addison right where she wants to be as a competitor.

SN

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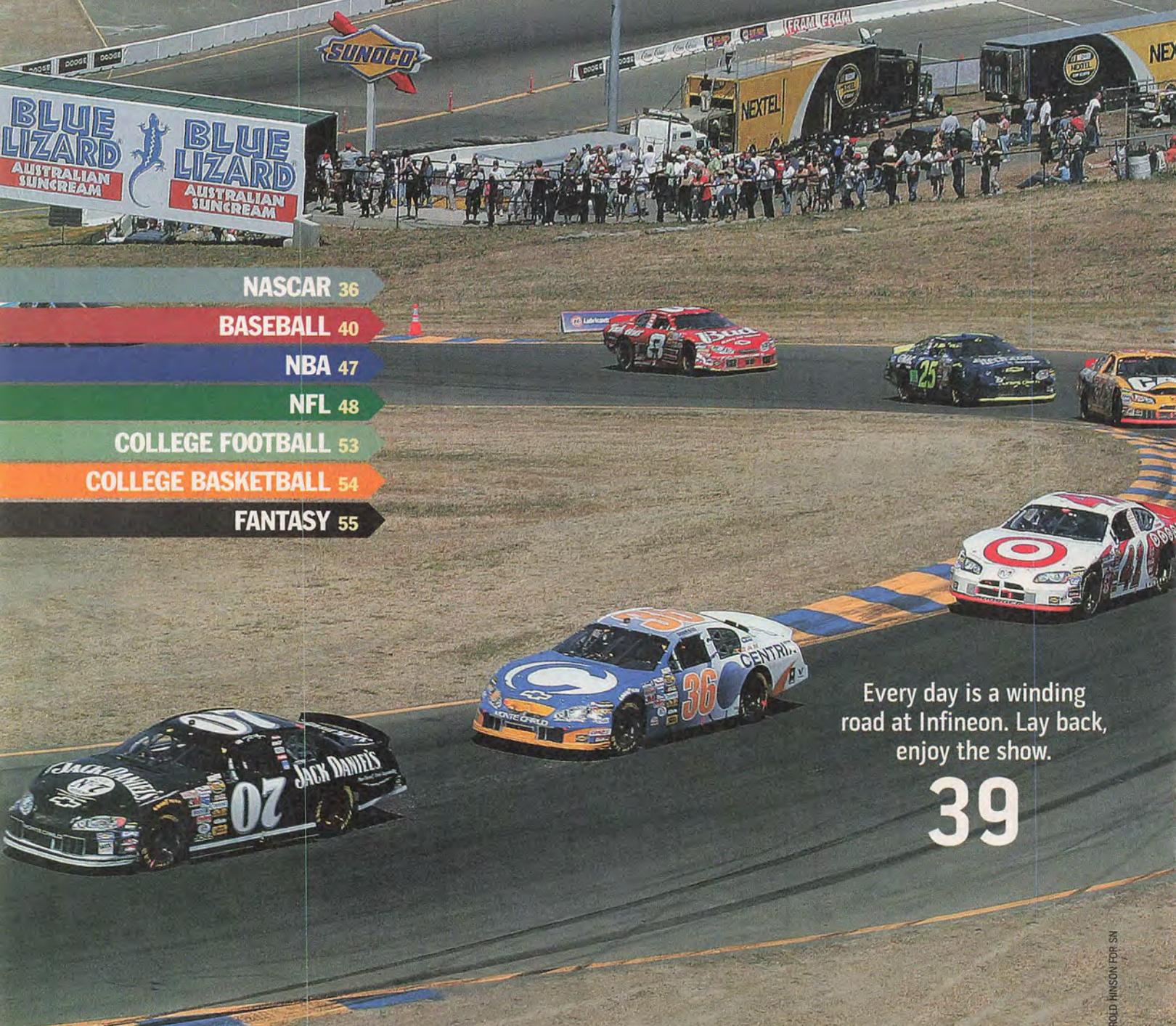
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Putting it all on the driver just leads to sore shoulders.

More than ever, racing is a team sport

speed reads

Robbie Loomis learned the hard way that not even legends can carry a race team.

For many years, he relied on Richard Petty to save the No. 43. That was understandable; how could a crew chief not believe that the King, with his seven championships, would ride to the rescue in his blue Pontiac?

When Loomis became Jeff Gordon's crew chief in 2000, he inherited an even better situation. Gordon was in his prime, and the team had won three titles in five years. With a driver of that caliber and the support of Hendrick Motorsports, the No. 24 Chevrolet seemingly could coast on autopilot.

So what went wrong last season, when Gordon missed the Chase for the NASCAR Nextel Cup? Loomis busts his butt and has top-notch leadership skills, but he was lulled into a comfort zone while hungrier teams passed the No. 24.

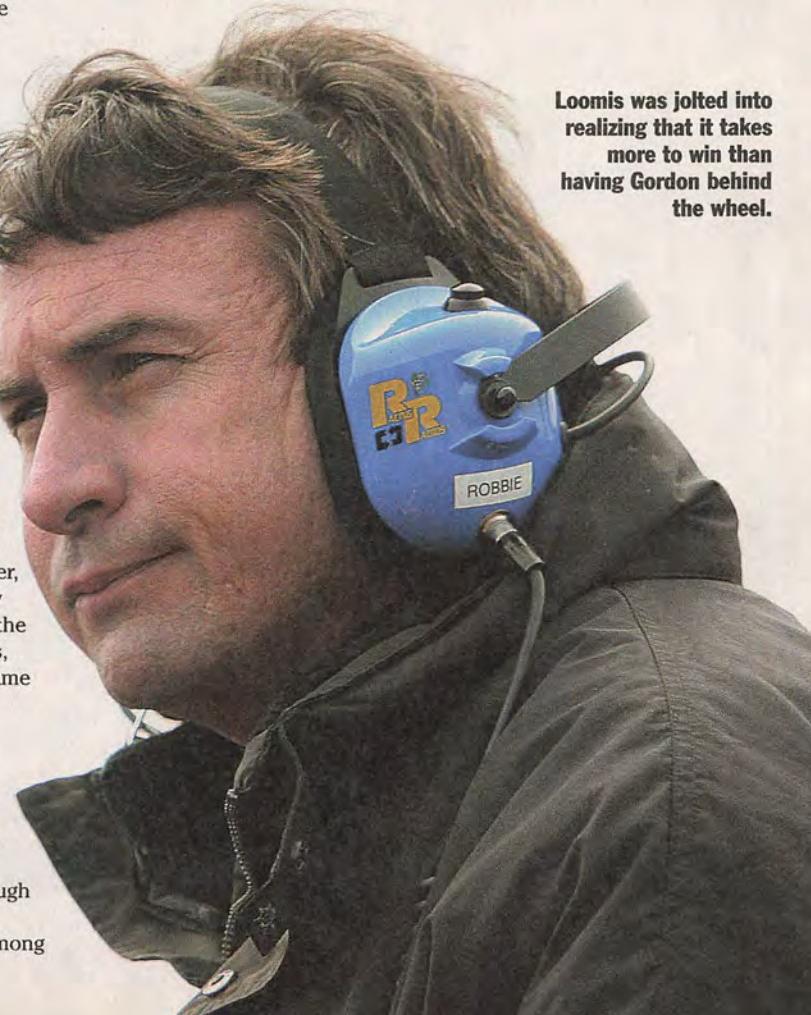
The wakeup call finally came when Loomis and Gordon parted late last season. Loomis knew the team's failure had nothing to do with his driver, a four-time Cup champion. Now back with Petty Enterprises as the executive VP of race operations, Loomis accepts some of the blame for last season because his personal life—his mother was ill—interfered with his professional responsibilities. He adds, "You have to have guys working for you who want to win at any cost."

Even HMS' depth wasn't enough to buoy the No. 24 last season. Competition is way too close among

Maybe it's time to reunite Jeff Gordon with his old engineer, Brian Whitesell, who oversees the Nos. 5 and 25 teams for Hendrick Motorsports. Gordon would be disappointed if he woke up the day after Richmond and realized he had missed the Chase for a second straight season.

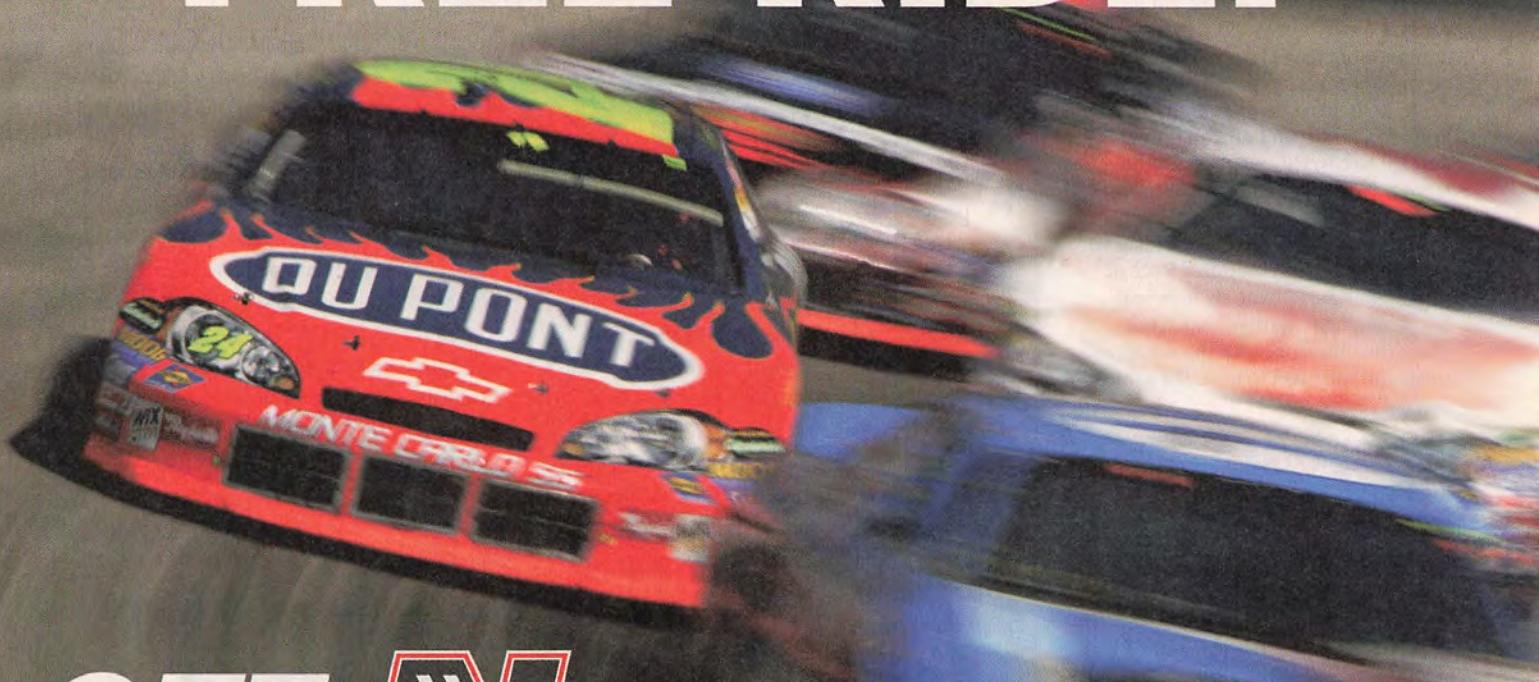
Silly Season and its implications extend well beyond the drivers. Teams need to hear from everyone—chiefs to floor sweepers—as to whether they're staying or going so team chemistry can be maintained.

Keep an eye on Billy Wease. He's 19, he drives for Penske Racing, and he finished second to David Stremme in last Friday's ARCA race in Michigan. Drivers coach Buddy Baker describes Wease's potential as "unlimited."



Loomis was jolted into realizing that it takes more to win than having Gordon behind the wheel.

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the top 20 teams for any crew chief to rely simply on a driver's talent. Mark Martin says the days of placing the responsibility of success completely on a driver are gone.

"You used to be able to do that if you had a really strong driver with broad shoulders. You could put the program on his back and he could carry it," Martin says. "But in today's competition, that's impossible. There's no driver in this series—the closest driver to being able to do that is Carl Edwards, and even Carl can't do enough to carry it to success if the team wasn't there and the stuff wasn't there for him."

Maybe, as NASCAR moves closer to resembling the International Race of Champions Series with its identical body templates, a driver again will make the difference. But the driver and team still will need to have the same level of desire.

SN

BLOG ALERT

I think Denny Hamlin has a shot at the Chase, and I don't mean making it.

Eddie D'Hondt, former team manager and car owner, boldly touts a rookie for the title. Give us your picks at sportingnews.com.

Could Dodge be the manufacturer that's rumored to be cutting ties with NASCAR? The buzz out of Detroit is that **John Fernandez**, director of Dodge

Motorsports operations, will become the new general manager at Ganassi Racing. If Dodge departs, would owner **Chip**

Ganassi go to Toyota or wait until Honda, the manufacturer for his IRL cars, enters the stock car scene? > Whoever takes over at Ganassi, one of the first items of business will be finding a replacement for

Casey Mears in the No. 42 car. Mears announced last week that he will move to Hendrick

Motorsports next season and drive the No. 25 car. Ganassi rookie **David Stremme** says he'd like to see Mears replaced by a veteran who also could be a mentor for Ganassi's other rookie, **Reed Sorenson**. > With **Dale Jarrett** leaving and **Elliott Sadler** possibly on the way out, too, **Robert Yates** knows it's time to bolster his program. Yates has entertained offers from potential partners, including **John**

Menard. Menard's son **Paul** has been competitive against Cup drivers in the Busch Series, and Yates would benefit from having a

competent young driver and an infusion of cash.

> **David Gilliland**'s victory in last Saturday's Meijer 300 Busch race in Kentucky created quite a buzz. Gilliland, a 30-year-old rookie starting the seventh

Busch race of his career, became the first non-NexTEL Cup regular to win on the Busch Series this season. Gilliland came out of nowhere. His race team has little funding and builds its own engines. Is he the real deal? **Robby Gordon**, who raced against David's father, **Butch**, a West Coast journeyman, says yes. > Burger King and Domino's will share sponsorship of the No. 00 Michael

Waltrip Racing Toyota next season. MWR still is looking for a third sponsor for the 00, and it also wants to add a third team. Owner **Michael Waltrip** says NASCAR's four-team limit sets the standard for future organizational models. Also, MWR driver **Bill Elliott** will test a Chevrolet at the Milwaukee Mile and Kentucky next week in an effort to help MWR gain experience and jell as a team.



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HAROLD HINSON FOR SN

Kasey Kahne's goals for this season are to bring his car home in one piece and build his communication skills with his team. That strategy paid off with a victory Sunday at Michigan, his fourth win of the season.

But the true test of his growth as a driver will come this weekend at Infineon Raceway, a road course. Kahne tested with road course specialist **Boris Said** last week at Virginia International Raceway in preparation for the race in Sonoma, Calif.

Kahne says he "learned some things" but doesn't consider himself a contender. "I think we can finish in the top 15 and with a little luck maybe better than that," he says. Kahne's best finish in four road course starts is 14th at Watkins Glen in 2004.

Pit Box

Who will win at Infineon?

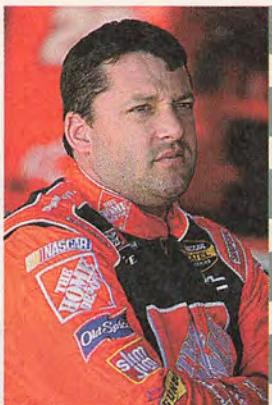
Fantasy experts Vinnie Iyer and Roger Kuznia pick Nextel Cup winners. Follow their running feud at sportingnews.com/nascar/pitbox.

Vinnie: If there were a Herbie No. 53 VW in Nextel Cup, it would be dominant at road courses. But I need to settle for the best real thing. **Tony Stewart** has two Infineon victories in seven starts, and few drivers show better shifting and

control on such a track. Roger, I'm glad you finally found your place in our little championship race and went with No. 2 because the No. 20 Chevy will help me get closer to finishing No. 1.

Sleeper pick: Robby Gordon

Avoid at all costs: Kyle Busch



Roger: It's great to listen to **Kurt Busch** give postrace interviews after he runs extremely well. He's overly articulate when describing his performance and what it took to win, and he almost comes off as smart-alecky. But I'm not saying a disparaging

word about him this week. He's excellent on road courses and is my pick to win. His fiancee is going to yell at you for picking against him, V-man. Good luck with that.

Sleeper pick: Boris Said

Avoid at all costs: Kasey Kahne

Nextel Cup points (based on how the experts' choices finished): Roger 1,041; Vinnie 996

TAKE 5

Reasons to watch Sunday's road course race

1. The hairpin Turn 11 will be Action Central. Look for plenty of bumping and banging there.
2. Road courses show which guys really know how to drive.
3. It is more advantageous for a driver to pit under green than under caution because he'll never get lapped under green. It takes about 80 seconds to complete a lap.
4. Robby Gordon actually has a better chance of winning the race than throwing his helmet in disgust.

5. Grand marshal

Cheech Marin will exclaim, "Gentlemen, start your engines!" and Chris Isaak will sing the national anthem. How can you not fall in love with that?

—Roger Kuznia



JENNIFER GRAYLOCK / AP



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BASEBALL

INSIDER



MIKE BERARDINO

This might be one deficit even the regal Braves can't overcome.

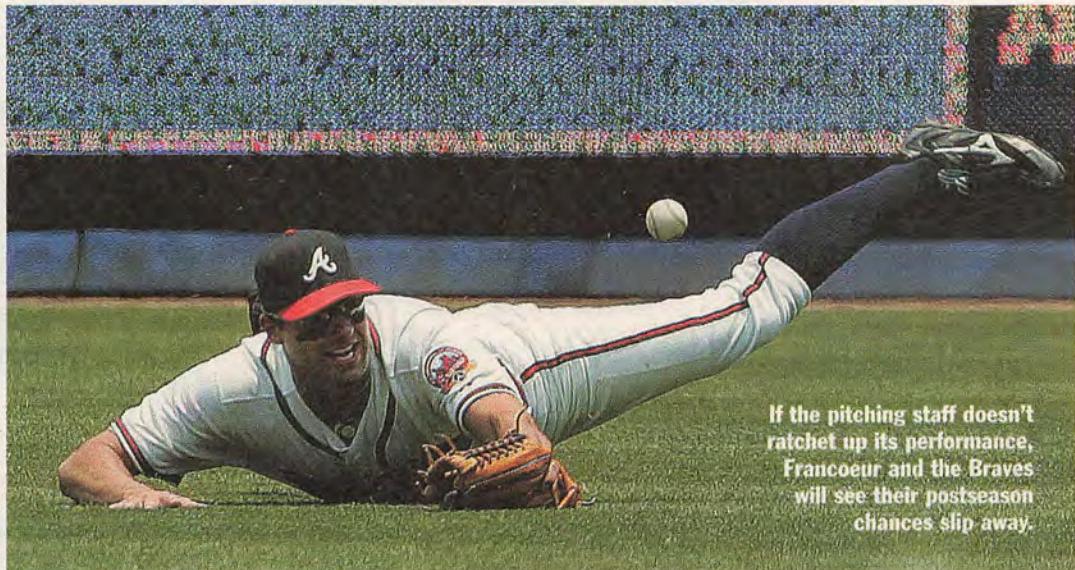
The Braves are streaking toward oblivion

Jeff Francoeur was 6 years old the last time baseball threw a postseason that didn't include the Braves. But with each mounting defeat for the 14-time defending division champions, that scenario—an unmistakable sign of the apocalypse—seems to be drawing closer. At the start of this week, the Braves were 13 games behind the division-leading Mets and in a tie for last place with the rookie-laden Marlins.

Atlanta hasn't been in a situation this dire since 1993, when the Braves spotted the Giants a double-digit cushion before winning the division.

"I can give you two reasons for what's happening: Philadelphia and New York," Braves ace John Smoltz says. "Never stronger and never better, in my mind. My self-analysis of our team really doesn't matter when you're talking about two other teams that are that much better."

The Braves are 5-9 combined against the top two teams in the National League East. After climbing to 27-23 with a three-game sweep of the Cubs in



If the pitching staff doesn't ratchet up its performance, Francoeur and the Braves will see their postseason chances slip away.

JOHN BAZEMORE / AP

late May at Wrigley Field, the Braves dropped 16 of 19.

Pitching problems are undeniable. Atlanta's starters are 17-31 with a 4.61 ERA—and the bullpen has been truly awful. Braves relievers rank 15th in the league with a 5.03 ERA, and they have blown 13 of 28 save opportunities. Overall, the team ERA of 4.75 ranks a shocking 15th in the league.

Although some try to pin the falloff on the departure of longtime pitching coach Leo Mazzone, Smoltz isn't buying it.

"Everyone talks about Leo's absence," Smoltz says. "That has nothing to do with it. This team was different last year. We did not outpitch people last year. We're certainly not outpitching people this year. A major part of our run is we outpitched people."

Indeed, the Braves' bullpen ERA ranked 12th in the N.L. last year. A bigger problem,

Smoltz says, is the "spoiled mentality" that has spread through a clubhouse that views winning as a birthright. He also hints at an "overestimation of talent."

"I am so sick of hearing we'll turn it on or we've done it before," Smoltz says. "We haven't done it before under these circumstances with the teams that are in front of us. And we're not exactly doing a lot of things to get better, either."

Isn't it strange to see a team managed by Bobby Cox struggle like this?

"Yeah, it is," says Marlins infielder Wes Helms, a former Brave who was on hand for four years of the streak (1999-2002). "To see them win 14 years in a row, you sit back and say, 'Well, they can turn it on the second half.'"

Just two summers ago, the Braves were 33-39 through June 25 before roaring back to win the division by 10 games. "You can't

count the Braves out," Helms says. "Bobby's a smart manager. He knows how to get his players playing. It is kind of weird to see that right now, but it's still only June."

Indeed, the Braves were just seven games off the wild-card pace. Maybe after all these years of October flameouts following division titles, the Braves should aim for the wild card.

"It's been joked about, but we're more than (seven) out right now in my mind," Smoltz says. "We have to play better baseball. If you start thinking what you're out and you have that mentality, that's a bad way to go."

And what does Smoltz's gut tell him about the season being saved? "If everything stays the way it is right now, I don't know how it can," he says. "But you know what? If there's a change or two, or we could find a way to get in a streak, you never know. But for the most part, this team needs to change its confidence." SN

speedreads



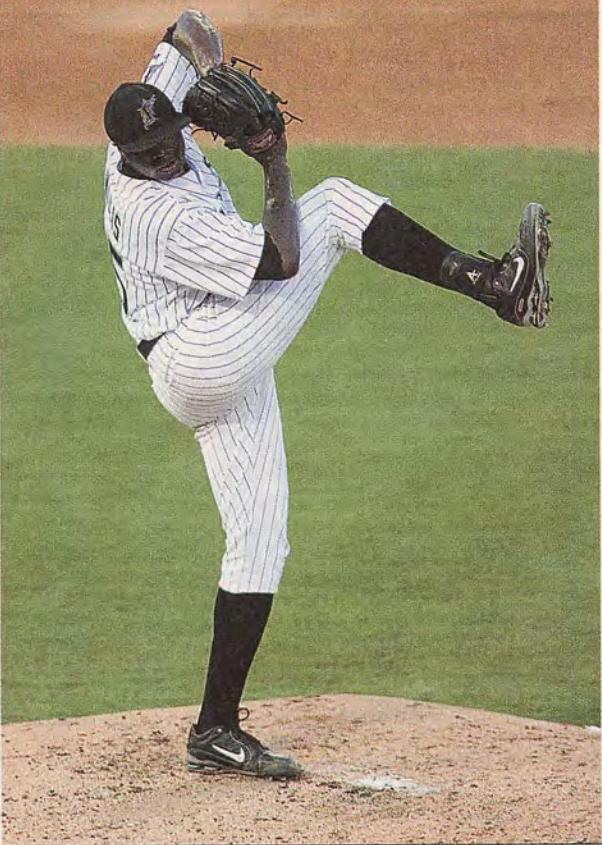
With **Kip Wells** close to returning from a March vein graft in his pitching arm, the Pirates could have another trading chip for their perpetual rebuilding project.

Twins catcher Joe Mauer is waging a fierce battle with himself. He's pitting his batting average (.380) vs. his throwing percentage (.355) against enemy basestealers.

GENE J. PUSKAR / AP

First-year Texas G.M. **Jon Daniels** cites a deeper bench and new dugout air conditioning at Ameriquest Field among the reasons he is optimistic the Rangers will avoid their usual summer wile. "Anything to try to keep these guys fresh," Daniels says. "I think over a long summer the heat is more of an issue than the perceived wind current out to right field. And our bench has a lot of interchangeable parts where **Buck Showalter** can give guys a rest without a big downgrade." ➤ A midmarket manager says clubs such as the Marlins and Devil Rays have the right idea. "Under the current system, it doesn't pay to be in the middle," he says. "You should either do it like **George Steinbrenner** does or take your payroll all the way down and

One rival club executive predicts LHP **Dontrelle Willis** will stay with the Marlins. "I don't think they're going to trade him now," he says. "They can't. They're playing too well. If they keep this up, they might not be all that far from contending again. And once they get to that point, a No. 1 like Willis is exactly what they'll be looking for. Besides, if they keep him for next year, what will that push their payroll to ... \$18 million?"



BOB LEVERONE / SN

INSIDE DISH

build with kids. That way you have a chance to get good in a hurry."

➤ Twins RHP **Brad Radke**, who had lowered his ERA below 6.00 for the first time since April, recently threw fastballs that bounced between 84 and

92 mph on the same night. That sort of range makes you wonder whether his arm is healthy or his mechanics are messed up.

➤ One N.L. manager says the Cubs' window is just about closed. "I love (G.M.) **Jim Hendry**, but he got pressured into making some of those deals over there. He felt like he had to get a leadoff man, but (**Juan Pierre**) just isn't the same player he was a few years ago. They gave up three arms for him, but I wouldn't have given up (RHP) **Ricky Nolasco** for Pierre straight up."

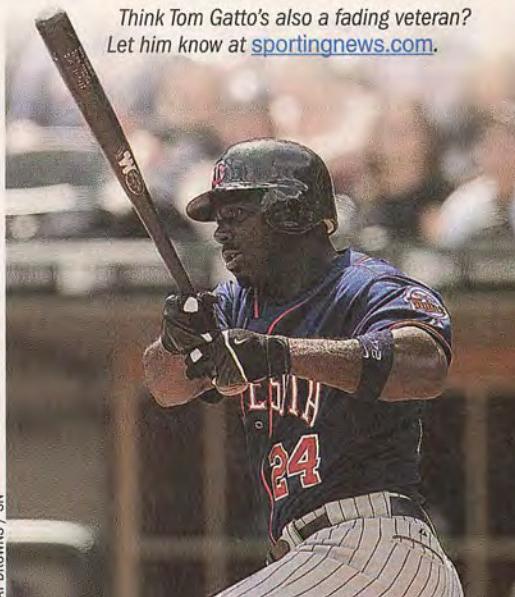
➤ Talk around baseball is Nationals President **Stan Kasten** likely will keep G.M. **Jim Bowden** through the end of this season. But no one would be surprised to see Kasten bring in someone more his style this winter. Braves assistant G.M. **Frank Wren**, who worked with Kasten for several years in Atlanta, would be among the front-runners. ➤ Although he is averaging an alarming 8.2 walks per nine innings, at least Orioles RHP **Daniel Cabrera** is keeping the ball in the park. The two homers hit off him in his first 58½ innings came from Blue Jays OF **Eric Hinske** and Mariners 2B **Jose Lopez**.

➤ New Englander **Donald Hall**, who has written often and beautifully about baseball, recently was named the nation's 14th poet laureate. The position includes an annual stipend of \$35,000 and a travel allowance of \$5,000. In comparison: If **Roger Clemens** averages six innings for each of the estimated 19 starts he'll make this summer for the Astros, he'll earn roughly \$35,819 per out.

BLOG ALERT

The Twins were counting on **Tony Batista**, **Rondell White** and **Ruben Sierra** to lift a sagging offense. Whoops.

Think Tom Gatto's also a fading veteran? Let him know at sportingnews.com.



JAY DROWNS / SN

Oh, Contreras

All-Star managers don't wield the authority they once did over roster selections, but they still choose the starting pitchers.

That's why White Sox ace Jose Contreras is a good bet to take the ball first for the American League on July 11 in Pittsburgh. He would be the third South Sider to get that honor in the past four years, joining Esteban Loaiza in 2003 and Mark Buehrle in 2005.

It doesn't matter that Contreras (7-0) also is on track to start two days earlier. White Sox and A.L. manager Ozzie Guillen vows to start Contreras at PNC Park even if it means having him toss a few pitches in a glorified side session.

"I'll be criticized about that," Guillen says. "I'll take the criticism. That's the man that's going to start for us."

Contreras hasn't lost a regular-season decision since August 15. He is 15-0 in his past 20 regular-season starts; including the postseason, the Cuban defector is 18-1 with a 2.69 ERA in his last 24 starts.

The key, both Guillen and catcher A.J. Pierzynski say, has been Contreras' ability to throw his split-finger fastball for strikes. Signed to a three-year, \$29 million contract extension this spring, Contreras looks like a bargain.



JAY DROWNS / SN

BASEBALL

THE CLOSER



Todd Jones

We get our Phil of screeching fans

If you think about it, baseball players get yelled at for a living. After all, we're in foreign territory half the time. Now, most people just go to the game to enjoy the game. They grab a hot dog, get a program and prop up their feet. But, let's face it, some fans come to heckle.

For them, it's a form of cheap entertainment. If they keep it tasteful, hecklers can be quite entertaining. The rudest fans in the country reside, of course, in Philadelphia. Not all Philly fans are rude, but there you get some real dum-dums.

Their sole purpose is to make your life unbearable, and the funny thing is they wear it like a badge of honor: *"Hey, this is a tough town. We boo Santa Claus."* Well, congratulations.

New York and Boston can be tough, but the fans there are knowledgeable. To hear them say

it, they're on a first-name basis with my mother—and every other player's mother.

You can see the troublemakers from a mile away. Usually, it's a few buddies going out for the night. One will get his beer muscles on, and then it starts.

You see them plotting. Finally, one of them leans over and lets you have it: "Hey, Jones! You stink!"

That's it? That's all you've got? All that beer at 8 bucks a cup and your buddies egging you on, and that's all you can come up with?

Come on. At least be creative. Do your homework. If I gave up a homer the night before, mention that. If I have an unusual middle name (like, say, Barton), heck, throw that out. At least show us you're prepared and have done some homework.



Todd Jones is a Tigers reliever. E-mail him at tjones@sportingnews.com.



JESSE D. GARRABRANT / GETTY IMAGES

This fan looks like he lacked holiday cheer—maybe it was the grog talking—as he got the bum's rush from Phillies staffers.

The most polite fans usually are in the Midwest. If a fan in St. Louis is being a jerk, we don't have to say a word. The fans there kill their own nuts.

In L.A., the fans don't usually rag on you unless you play for the Giants. They don't even talk to you unless you're one of the big guys.

In Canada, fans look at you kind of funny. They cheer loudest for the catcher because he's the

closest thing to a goalie baseball has. I'm kidding, of course.

What the fans want most is interaction. If you wave or smile, they usually will be great to you the rest of the time. They want a ball. They want you to make their day at the game an experience.

For the most part, the fans I've dealt with have been wonderful. I've met neat people all over the country. If players treat fans with respect, we'll get it in return most of the time. Unless we're in Philly.

A.L. EAST

BALTIMORE ORIOLES

RHP **Chris Ray**, in his first full major league season, didn't blow a save in his first 18 opportunities. A former starter, Ray has stepped in for departed All-Star closer **B.J. Ryan** without missing a beat. Ray is holding hitters to a .188 average. ... Lefthanded relief specialist **Tim Byrdak** (elbow) is progressing in his rehab and will begin throwing soon. He has been out since mid-April and could return near the All-Star break. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** After compiling a 2-2 record with a 1.48 ERA at Class AAA Ottawa in his first five starts, RHP **Hayden Penn**, 21, was on the verge of staking a claim to a rotation spot with the Orioles. But an appendectomy set him back. Penn currently is working to restore his arm strength and conditioning to presurgery levels at the team's minor league complex. He's an excellent candidate to be a starter in the second half. —Spencer Fordin

BOSTON RED SOX

G.M. **Theo Epstein** is expected to get a starting pitcher by the nonwaiver deadline. The season has worn away what had appeared to be a surplus of good starters. A trade (RHP **Bronson Arroyo** for OF **Wily Mo Pena**) backfired, RHP **Josh Beckett** has been inconsistent, RHP **Matt Clement** is a mess, and LHP **David Wells** (knee) has been on the D.L. more times than on the mound. ... The decision to move CF **Coco Crisp** down in the order and put 1B **Kevin Youkilis** in the leadoff spot is further evidence of how much the Red Sox value on-base percentage. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** Hard-throwing LHP **Jon Lester** has looked sharp since being called up from Class AAA earlier this month. Lester, 22, throws a fastball between 92-94 mph, and he sets it up with a tantalizing curve and an above-average changeup. He also is known for having strong work habits. —Ian Browne

NEW YORK YANKEES

LHP **Randy Johnson** continues to search for consistency. He had solid outings against the Red Sox and Tigers before getting lit up by the A's. He rebounded against the Indians, when he got his fastball back into the 95-96 range. ... Lefthanded specialist **Mike Myers** had left-handed hitters to about a .200 average. But his work against righthanded hitters has been just as impressive; he has given up two hits in 12 at-bats.

KEEP AN EYE ON: RHP **Octavio Dotel** (elbow) will rejoin the team at the end of the month after completing his rehab assignment. He'll be welcomed by RHPs **Scott Proctor** and **Kyle Farnsworth**, who have been the primary setup men for RHP **Mariano Rivera**. Proctor has thrown more innings and pitches than any reliever in the majors. When Dotel returns, the team will have two setup men available for each game and keep the third fresh for the next day. —Mark Feinsand



JOHN DUNN FOR SN

TAMPA BAY DEVIL RAYS

RHPs **Chad Harville** and **James Shields** credit their recent success to their mastering of arm angles. Harville has been working to create a downward angle with his pitches, which makes it more difficult for hitters to meet the ball squarely with the bat. Shields, who won three of his first four starts after being recalled from Class AAA Durham, throws all of his pitches, including his good changeup, with the same arm angle and speed. He says that creates deception and prevents the hitter from reading the pitch out of his hand. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** 3B **Aubrey Huff** has usually been a slow starter. This season that sluggishness has lingered, and it can be attributed to the left knee strain he suffered April 11. Like all players, Huff's legs play a big role in his swing, so it has taken awhile for him to get his knee healthy. Now that it is, he has begun to show signs of life; he has hit .333 since June 11. —Bill Chastain

TORONTO BLUE JAYS

RHP **Roy Halladay** hasn't been striking out as many batters this year because he has adopted a new philosophy. Unlike in the past, he has been trying to spot the two first pitches over the plate to induce quick outs. He still looks for strikeouts when the situation calls for it. ... RHP **Vinnie Chulk**, who has been working on his fastball and throwing with more of a downward angle, was optioned to Class AAA to make room for starting RHP **Josh Towers**, who was recalled. With the return of Towers, RHP **Ty Taubenheim** was moved the bullpen.

KEEP AN EYE ON: RHP **A.J. Burnett** couldn't be coming off the D.L. at a better time. The rotation ranks near the bottom of the league in innings, and the bullpen is wearing down. Barring another flare-up with his elbow, Burnett will provide a big boost. He is returning during a stretch of interleague games, so he'll face opponents with whom he is familiar from his years in Florida. —Jordan Bastian

A.L. CENTRAL

CHICAGO WHITE SOX

With Scott Podsednik struggling, hot-hitting Pablo Ozuna might get more starts in left field against lefthanded pitchers. Ozuna makes things happen from the leadoff position with his bat and legs. ... Newly acquired RHP David Riske gives the club another quality bullpen arm. Riske will be used exclusively in a setup role—the onetime Indians closer will not be asked to work the ninth inning on days closer Bobby Jenks is unavailable. **KEEP AN EYE ON:**

LHP Mark Buehrle has figured out that less is more with his velocity. He has come to realize an 82-mph pitch with movement works best for him and is resisting the urge to throw harder. Overthrowing causes Buehrle's pitches to straighten and be much more hittable. He allowed two runs in eight innings in each of his first two starts with the new approach. In the three starts before that, he allowed 23 hits and 10 earned runs in 20 innings. —Scott Merkin

CLEVELAND INDIANS

The offense might suffer with RF Casey Blake (strained oblique muscle) on the D.L., but the injury may be a blessing in disguise because the team is moving toward playing young prospects. Blake's replacement, OF Franklin Gutierrez, will get a taste of the major leagues, and the club will get a good read on how he handles big-league pitching. ... SS Jhonny Peralta is standing deeper in the box because he has been having trouble with breaking balls and off-speed pitches. Peralta has been moved to the lower third of the order, from where he will try to straighten out his problems.

KEEP AN EYE ON: Ben Broussard could soon become the everyday first baseman again. Platoon partner Eduardo Perez is getting more starts in the outfield, and if the club trades Perez, a potential free agent, Broussard, a lefthanded hitter, will return to full-time duty and play against lefthanders. —Anthony Castrovilli



Infante

KANSAS CITY ROYALS

The offense has improved under new hitting coach Mike Barnett, who replaced Andre David on May 1. The biggest difference has been with runners in scoring position—Kansas City hit .216 before Barnett's arrival and is hitting .280 since. Barnett tries to keep things simple and get the players to focus on what they're doing right. ... RHP Brandon Duckworth earned an extended look in the rotation after impressing manager Buddy Bell with his stuff in his Royals debut. Duckworth, 30, replaced RHP Kyle Snyder, 28, who made just one start before being designated for assignment.

KEEP AN EYE ON: LHP Mark Redman is 3-0 with a 3.74 ERA in three starts since coming off the bereavement list. Redman says his surgically repaired knee is fine and his concentration is sharper since returning to action. He also is avoiding the big innings that derailed him earlier this season. —Jim Molony

DETROIT TIGERS

If Omar Infante is trying to hit the ball to the opposite field more, following the example set by fellow Venezuelans RF Magglio Ordonez and SS Carlos Guillen. Infante, a righthanded hitter, has been a dead pull hitter; now he's training himself to fight off inside pitches and hit them to right field. ... RHP Fernando Rodney blames bad mechanics for his recent struggles. His arm was too far behind his body in his delivery, which caused him to fly open when he threw. His location and velocity suffered. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** RHP Jeremy Bonderman no longer has to worry about developing into a No. 1 starter with LHP Kenny Rogers around, and as a result Bonderman has become a more effective pitcher. An improved changeup has helped, too; the pitch complements Bonderman's fastball and slider and makes him less predictable. —Jason Beck

MINNESOTA TWINS

Jason Bartlett is back as the starting shortstop after a stint at Class AAA Rochester, and the club demonstrated its commitment to him by trading IF Juan Castro to the Reds last week. Castro had replaced Bartlett as the starter when Bartlett was sent down. Bartlett needed to become a more vocal infield leader before the Twins would recall him. ... The club rushed DH/OF Ruben Sierra (biceps) back from the D.L. after trading Castro. The Twins opted to bring Sierra, who they feel will provide a key bat off the bench, up quickly rather than rely on unproven hitter in the bench role.

KEEP AN EYE ON: OF Jason Kubel has an opportunity for a lot of playing time. The club is unhappy with the production at DH, and LF Shannon Stewart is taking longer than expected to return from plantar fasciitis. Kubel has regained his timing at the plate after missing last season because of a knee injury. —Kelly Thesier

A.L. WEST

LOS ANGELES ANGELS

3B Dallas McPherson is gaining confidence as he gets more playing time, but his inability to hit lefthanded pitching makes McPherson, a lefthanded hitter, more of a platoon player. His defense continues to improve; he is particularly adept at charging bunts and slowly hit ground balls. ... RHP Francisco Rodriguez, the closer, and RHP Scot Shields, the primary setup reliever, aren't getting regular work

because the team hasn't been in many close games. The inactivity has affected Rodriguez more—he is having trouble throwing strikes and is going too deep into counts.

KEEP AN EYE ON: If RHP Bartolo Colon makes the rest of his scheduled starts this season,



JOHN CORDES FOR SN

he'll stabilize the rotation and help the whole club improve. If last year's A.L. Cy Young winner again is forced out by an injury, the Angels likely will be looking ahead to 2007 before long. Colon made three starts in April before going on the D.L. because of inflammation in his pitching shoulder. —Mike Scarr

OAKLAND ATHLETICS

DH Frank Thomas' quad injury won't hurt the offense much. The A's are playing a streak of nine games in N.L. parks, so Thomas would have been available only as a pinch hitter in those games. Even when he's healthy, Thomas doesn't move well enough to play in the field. ... RHP Rich Harden's elbow injury isn't as bad as originally feared, and the club hopes he can return to the rotation shortly after the All-Star break. RHP Kirk Saarloos remained in the rotation when Harden went back on the D.L. ... The return of RHP Justin Duchscherer (elbow) from the D.L. will give the bullpen a huge boost. The A's have been relying on RHP Kiko Calero more than they would prefer.

KEEP AN EYE ON: RHP Joe Blanton has been inconsistent in his second season, but he took off at about this time last year. He was 12-7 with a 2.53 ERA after June 1. Blanton recently changed his between-starts routine—he ditched his deliberate pace during bullpen sessions and adopted a game-speed approach. —Mychael Urban

SEATTLE MARINERS

1B Richie Sexson is trying to be more aggressive earlier in the count, and it's starting to pay off. He had a grand slam against the Angels when he jumped on a 1-1 fastball. Sexson gets in trouble when he falls behind; at the start of the week, he was 0-for-19 on 0-2 counts. ... Not only does hitting coach Jeff Pentland have righthanded 2B Jose Lopez driving the ball the other way, but now SS Yuniesky Betancourt is doing the same. Betancourt hit .333 in his first 15 games in June. ... Manager Mike Hargrove would like to see the Mariners get more walks, so look for a more patient approach in coming weeks. The club entered the week last in the A.L. in walks.

KEEP AN EYE ON: LHP Jake Woods, who primarily has been used in a mop-up role, might be on the verge of assuming a more important job. Woods has ironed out some control issues he had earlier in the season and, entering the week, had not allowed an earned run since May 23. He also has shown the ability to pitch multiple innings per appearance. —Corey Brock

TEXAS RANGERS

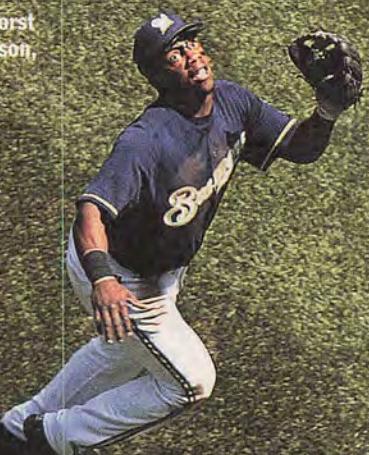
C Gerald Laird is starting to take playing time away from Rod Barajas. Laird's hitting has improved as the season has progressed—he's batting over .400 in June. But Barajas isn't giving up the job easily. After a terrible start, he has recovered his form at the plate and has contributed some clutch hits. ... SS Michael Young made his defense a priority during the winter and in spring training, and it has paid off. He broke Scott Fletcher's club record of 32 consecutive games at shortstop without an error.

KEEP AN EYE ON: With RHP Antonio Alfonseca designated for assignment, the Rangers need a seventh-inning reliever, and RHP Scott Feldman likely will get a hard look in the role. Feldman keeps the ball down, throws strikes and can get a strikeout when needed. Opponents are hitting .213 against him, and he put up 20 strikeouts in 20 innings over his first 18 games. The Rangers like Feldman's aggressiveness on the mound—he isn't afraid to challenge hitters. —T.R. Sullivan

Errors in their way

SNumber
20

Errors by Brewers second baseman Rickie Weeks, worst in the majors. By comparison, the entire Red Sox team began the week with 23. Many people in baseball believe Weeks would be better in center field.



JEFFREY PHELPS / AP



JAY DROWNS / SN

Other top fumblers

First base	Ryan Howard, Phillies	9
Shortstop	Rafael Furcal, Dodgers	16
Third base	Edwin Encarnacion, Reds	14
Left field	Adam Dunn, Reds	7
Center field	Five tied with	3
Right field	Jeff Francoeur, Braves	6
Catcher	Ramon Hernandez, Orioles	8
Pitcher	Nine tied with	3

Did you know?

Error totals have been shrinking the past two decades. This season, 16 clubs are on pace to commit fewer than 100 errors. In 1996, just four teams were below 100, and no team was under the century mark in 1986. And today's poor fielding teams aren't nearly as poor, statistically speaking, as those in years past. The Royals had the most errors in the majors last season with 125; a decade ago, 125 would have ranked in the middle of the pack.

N.L. EAST

ATLANTA BRAVES

2B Marcus Giles could be dealt by the trading deadline. He has failed to adjust to the leadoff spot, and his cost may exceed his value when he is eligible to become a free agent after next season. Giles, 28, still can produce as a No. 2 hitter and is strong on defense. ... 1B Scott Thorman is tearing up Class AAA pitching, and the Braves soon will have to decide whether to promote him. He's a more consistent hitter than 1B Adam

LaRoche and has just as much power. Thorman's athleticism allows him to play either corner outfield spot, too.

KEEP AN EYE ON: RF Jeff Francoeur has had a roller-coaster start to the season. He still strikes out a lot, but recently he has been hitting more balls to right field and showing he can cover the outside part of the plate. His increasing knowledge of pitchers and situations will help him finish the season strong. —Mark Bowman

FLORIDA MARLINS

Acquired from the Reds in a May 26 trade, OF Cody Ross has shown enough power to hit fifth, behind 3B Miguel Cabrera, and fourth when Cabrera bats third against lefthanded starters. Ross' playing time increased when LF Josh Willingham was sidelined by a strained left hand. Ross is equally adept at both corner outfield spots. ... RHP Randy Messenger, 24, has the makings of a future closer, but for now he is settling in as a seventh-inning reliever. He has a 95-mph fastball and a hard slider and shows his changeup occasionally to keep righthanded hitters guessing.

KEEP AN EYE ON: Taylor TANKERSLEY, a rookie called up June 2 from Class AA, will be everything from a situational lefthander to a multi-inning reliever who likely will get save chances. A starter in the minor leagues, Tankersley has a 93-mph fastball and hard breaking ball that allow him to adapt to a variety of roles. —Joe Frisaro

NEW YORK METS

2B Chris Woodward might get some extra playing time at second base in the dog days as manager Willie Randolph tries to keep IF Jose Valentin, 36, fresh. Valentin's performance has been a revelation. He hadn't played second base since 1994 and had played only 102½ career innings there before this season. ... Randolph will use the DH slot to get 1B Julio Franco more at-bats during the team's streak of nine straight interleague road games. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** C Ramon Castro will get more playing time because of the acquisition of OF/C Eli Marrero, which will enable the team to use Castro more often as a pinch hitter and to double-switch him into the lineup. The Mets' comfortable division lead also will prompt them to give Castro more starts in an effort to keep C Paul Lo Duca rested. Castro prospered last summer when former Mets C Mike Piazza was injured. —Marty Noble

PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES

RF Bobby Abreu continues to get on base, regardless of whether he's swinging the bat well. He again is among the league leaders in pitches seen per plate appearance, which leads to frequent walks. ... With a high-90s fastball and a lack of other reliable pitches, RHP Scott Mathieson might fit best as a closer. But the Phillies are confident in the rookie's ability to develop a slider and changeup and become a durable starter with top-of-the-rotation potential. ... Philadelphia's normally strong defense has been slacking, and poor fielding performances have led to fielding drills and a renewed emphasis on fundamentals.

KEEP AN EYE ON: Rookie LHP Cole Hamels is primed to go on a roll. His walks totals have decreased and his strikeouts have increased since his call-up. The key to his success has been getting hitters to chase pitches. —Ken Mandel

WASHINGTON NATIONALS

The firing of bullpen coach John Wettemann dealt the relievers an emotional shock, and manager Frank Robinson hopes they will take their anger to the mound and pitch more effectively. At the time of the move, the bullpen was 7-12 with a 4.45 ERA and 105 walks in 210½ innings. ... OF Jose Guillen, who recently returned from the disabled list, has pledged to not let trade rumors get to him. His contract extension

talks broke off in April, and the decision to re-sign him now rests with the team's new owners.

KEEP AN EYE ON: The Nationals have asked 3B Brendan Harris, 25, to consider playing the outfield. A year ago, Harris was not in the Nationals' plans, but a successful stint in the Arizona Fall League raised his stock. Adding another position—he already is the Nats' emergency catcher—will make him more valuable. —Bill Ladson

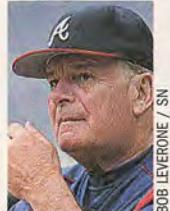


Abreu

GEORGE WIDMAN / AP

■ Roger Clemens is supposed to make his season debut against the Twins, but the better big-picture story might be A.J.

Burnett's return from the D.L. If he earns his money—even if he earns half his money—Toronto could have enough pitching to complement its beer-league offense and taste champagne in the fall. The first hurdle for ex-N.L. Easter Burnett: an 0-for-career mark vs. the Braves.



■ OK, so this isn't exactly a playoff preview. But this game within the game makes it compelling: rarely-gives-up-a-hit Carlos Zambrano vs. the rarely-makes-an-out Joe Mauer.

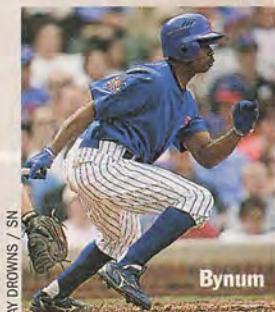
■ For the better part of a decade, these were the heavy favorites to meet in the World Series. Well, write it in Sharpie: There's no way that's going to happen this year. In fact, **Bobby Cox** is starting to get ejected on purpose just so he doesn't have to watch his bullpen.

in Sharpie: There's no way that's going to happen this year. In fact, **Bobby Cox** is starting to get ejected on purpose just so he doesn't have to watch his bullpen.



MILWAUKEE BREWERS

RF **Geoff Jenkins'** struggles against lefthanded pitching (.129 average, .444 OPS) prompted manager **Ned Yost** to bench him when the team faced Indians LHP **C.C. Sabathia** in interleague play. Yost already had dropped Jenkins to the No. 7 spot and hinted he might use someone else against lefthanders until Jenkins broke out of his slump. ... RHP **Carlos Villanueva** pitched six shutout innings in his first big-league start after he was called up from Class AA but still is at least a year from a regular spot in the rotation. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** OF **Corey Hart** has done everything the team has asked in limited opportunities, and his role will expand dramatically if the team trades LF **Carlos Lee**, CF **Brady Clark** or Jenkins, each of whom has drawn interest. Hart plays all three positions and has surprising speed for a player known for his gap power. —*Adam McCauley*



Bynum

CHICAGO CUBS

Rookie RHP **Carlos Marmol** has a mid-90s fastball and a slurve, but he will need to show he has a third pitch to stay in the big leagues. The Cubs would have preferred to ease him in as a long reliever, but they had to use Marmol as a starter when RHP **Kerry Wood** (shoulder) suffered a setback. ... 1B **Phil Nevin** has provided needed pop and will stay in the lineup until 1B **Derrek Lee** (wrist) returns from the D.L. ... The Cubs had hoped RHP **Wade Miller** (shoulder) would be ready to pitch in June, but he developed tendinitis in the shoulder during his rehabilitation, so a July return now is more likely. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** Freddie Bynum could soon be sharing left field with Matt Murton. Murton, a righthanded hitter, has struggled against righthanded pitchers. Bynum, a lefthanded hitter, has done well in limited playing time, showing unexpected pop. He also has more speed than Murton. —*Carrie Muskat*

CINCINNATI REDS

Look for newly acquired IF **Juan Castro** to improve one of baseball's worst defenses. Castro, who is strong at second, shortstop and third, likely will be used in a utility role and as a late-inning substitute. He will provide little offense, but the Reds didn't bring him back for his bat. ... IF **Ray Olmedo**, who was sent to the minors to make room for Castro, impressed the organization with his hustle and an improved approach. ... RHP **Joe Mays** has been effective out of the bullpen. His sinking fastball has been clocked between 89 and 91 mph; manager **Jerry Narron** says that's faster than when Mays was pitching for the Royals. Mays also is getting good movement on the sinker. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** RF **Austin Kearns** is thriving at the plate and has become one of the club's top run producers now that he is playing every day for the first time in his career. Kearns remains one of the club's few accomplished fielders. —*Mark Sheldon*

PITTSBURGH PIRATES

RHP **Kip Wells**, who underwent surgery in March to alleviate a blood clot below his throwing shoulder, likely will return to the rotation by the end of June. Wells will replace either LHP **Oliver Perez** or RHP **Victor Santos**. The enigmatic Perez could be sent to Class AAA to work on his mechanics and his confidence. ... With the emergence of **Freddy Sanchez** as the everyday third baseman, Joe Randa will get only spot duty. Randa, an offseason free-agent addition, struggled before going on the D.L. for a month with a foot injury. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** 3B **Jose Bautista** is stuck behind Sanchez, but he eventually could become the team's everyday center fielder. Bautista does not have exceptional speed, but he gets great jumps on fly balls and has a strong arm. He primarily is being used as a leadoff man, but the team believes he will develop the power to be a middle-of-the-order hitter. —*Ed Eagle*

rain-x presents Dream week

June 22-28

THURSDAY, 6/22

Blue Jays at Braves

FRIDAY, 6/23

Astros at White Sox

SATURDAY, 6/24

Reds at Indians

SUNDAY, 6/25

Cubs at Twins

MONDAY, 6/26

Braves at Yankees

TUESDAY, 6/27

A's at Padres

WEDNESDAY, 6/28

Mets at Red Sox



■ Three words that create a buzz: *World Series* rematch. However, if you remember the original, then this sequel might pack the wallop of *Big Momma's House 2*.



■ Two strong pitching clubs. Two challenged offenses. One big ballpark. On paper, that adds up to a low-scoring affair. Then again, no one plays the game on paper. Well, except Billy Beane.

■ Pedro pitching at Fenway used to be an event. It will be again. —*Kyle Veltrop*

MLB.com

N.L. CENTRAL

HOUSTON ASTROS

If Mike Lamb's hitting has made it difficult to keep him out of the lineup. Once 3B **Morgan Ensberg** (shoulder) returns, Lamb mainly will play first base and push 1B **Lance Berkman** to the outfield. That, in turn, will cut into the playing time of RF **Jason Lane** or LF **Preston Wilson**. Lamb is comfortable batting second and adds a power threat to the top of the order. ... RHP **Brad Lidge**, the closer, will throw a minimum of every four days, even if he has to pitch in nonsave situations. Lidge says that pitching in low-pressure situations helps him stay sharp.

KEEP AN EYE ON: IF/OF **Chris Burke** has arrived. He appears to have beaten out **Willy Taveras** for the center field job. Burke hits for average, and he walks and steals bases. Becoming a full-time player has boosted his confidence and helped him relax at the plate. He has become a fixture at the top of the lineup, hitting first, second or third. —*Alyson Footer*

ST. LOUIS CARDINALS

The Cardinals have not ruled out giving RHP **Anthony Reyes** another look, even with all their starters healthy. Reyes has been outstanding at Class AAA Memphis, and the rotation has been inconsistent. The decision to move RHP **Sidney Ponson** to the bullpen could clear the way for Reyes' return. ... 3B **Scott Rolen** is back to his 2004 form, mainly because of his ability to stay behind the ball when he swings. When Rolen keeps his weight and upper body back, he's less susceptible to high, hard stuff. ... The **Hector Luna/Aaron Miles** platoon at second base has tilted toward Luna, who is outshitting Miles. Luna still can be shaky in the field, though. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** There never has been any doubt about rookie RHP **Adam Wainwright**'s stuff. With two fastballs and a devastating curve, he has the necessary pitches. He also has displayed poise and will continue to be used in tight situations. —*Matthew Leach*



ROB CARR / AP

UNC's Miller is one of four first-round picks on ACC teams.

Series shows the ACC is a power conference in baseball, too

The Atlantic Coast Conference is best known for the basketball it plays along Tobacco Road. This year, baseball has taken the conference down a road much less traveled—the road to Omaha.

ACC schools—Clemson, Georgia Tech, Miami and North Carolina—make up half of the eight-team field in this year's College World Series.

Clemson, Georgia Tech and North Carolina all are on one side of the bracket (along with Cal State Fullerton), which gives the conference a good shot at winning its first Series championship since 1955, when Wake Forest won it all.

"It has been proven this year that the ACC is the toughest conference in the country," Clemson coach Jack Leggett says.

Several decisions by the conference have helped it rise to prominence in recent years:

- The ACC, albeit with more of an eye toward football than baseball, added perennial powers Florida State and Miami, which have 40 CWS appearances combined. Miami has won four national titles as an independent.

- Several schools have made a greater commitment to winning, as evidenced by upgraded facilities. Clemson and N.C. State each spent more than \$5 million to renovate its park, and North Carolina's planned makeover of Boshamer Stadium will cost \$12 million. That's equal to what Florida State spent two years ago to improve Dick Howser Stadium.

But the biggest key to success is getting good players. The ACC has produced at least one first-round pick in each of the past 15 drafts, and this year it had four first-rounders: North Carolina pitchers Andrew Miller (Tigers) and Daniel Bard (Red Sox), Clemson outfielder Tyler Colvin (Cubs) and Wake Forest third baseman Matt Antonelli (Padres). Fifty players were drafted overall. And 30 active major leaguers—including Nomar Garciaparra, Jason Varitek, Kris Benson, J.D. Drew and Mark Teixeira—played for schools that currently are ACC members.

The conference also knows how to generate publicity: Last month it announced that the 2009 conference tournament will be played at Fenway Park, with Boston College, another recent addition, as the host. But the best publicity, Georgia Tech coach Danny Hall says, would come from a team going all the way in Omaha, something Hall sees happening "sooner rather than later." —Kirk Kenney

Onward and upward

The ACC is one of the best conferences at producing big-leaguers. The top five:

1. Pac-10	41
2. SEC	34
3. ACC	30
4. Big 12	23
5. Big West	20

The figures are based on schools' current affiliations, so the ACC's 30 players include those who played at Florida State and Miami before the programs began conference play in 1992 and 2005.

N.L. WEST

MLB.com

ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS

After focusing more on his two-seam sinking fastball last season, LHP **Randy Choate** was encouraged this spring by pitching coach **Bryan Price** to work more on his slider. An improved slider would help Choate, who was recalled from Class AAA last week, get more easy flies to left from lefthanded hitters and perhaps more strikeouts. ... If RHP **Claudio Vargas** is throwing his off-speed pitches for strikes, expect a good outing. If not, there's a good chance he will struggle.

KEEP AN EYE ON: Since making his major league debut at the end of May, RHP **Enrique Gonzalez** has shown impressive stuff and demeanor. Gonzalez has an outstanding slider and a mid-90s fastball. He showed his poise in ending the team's recent seven-game losing streak and will be a mainstay in the rotation the rest of 2006. —Steve Gilbert



JACK DEMPSEY / AP

COLORADO ROCKIES

The team has been playing without a backup first baseman, but it has a plan if something happens to 1B **Todd Helton**:

Helton: 3B **Garrett Atkins** played the position extensively at UCLA and can move to first. ... CF **Cory Sullivan** might have a new home in the No. 2 slot in the order. The Rockies like to sacrifice, and Sullivan tied a major league record with four of them in one game. ...

RHP **Aaron Cook**, who has gotten scant run support this season, has fought the temptation to try to be perfect. He is leaving fewer pitches up in the zone. **KEEP AN EYE ON:**

Prospect RHP **Ubaldo Jimenez** left spring training needing to work on throwing strikes and being more consistent with his delivery. He had 76 strikeouts and 37 walks in his first 68½ innings at Class AA Tulsa and is a candidate to move to Class AAA Colorado Springs in the second half of the season. —Thomas Harding

LOS ANGELES DODGERS

RHP **Chad Billingsley** was good enough in his major league debut to win the fifth starter spot, and LHP **Odalis Perez** and RHP **Jae Seo** were relegated to the bullpen indefinitely. Billingsley had a 96-mph fastball and threw his curveball for strikes, even when he was behind in the count. ... 3B **Bill Mueller**'s recovery from knee surgery is not going well, which could mean his career is in jeopardy. ... RHP **Eric Gagne** is back on the D.L., so RHP **Takashi Saito**, a 36-year-old rookie, inherits the closer role. RHP **Danys Baez** will be the setup man. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** 3B **Andy LaRoche** was considered the best position prospect in the organization before he performed poorly in spring training and was sent to Class AA for a second season. After a slow start, he has been promoted to Class AAA. If 3B **Willy Aybar** slumps, LaRoche probably will be called up. He's not a smooth fielder, but he can hit. —Ken Gurnick

SAN DIEGO PADRES

Considered a question mark during the spring, the bullpen has been an asset and leads the N.L. in relief ERA. The eighth and ninth innings are in reliable hands with RHPs **Scott Linebrink** and **Trevor Hoffman**, though Linebrink has been hurt by home runs more this season than in recent years.

RHPs **Brian Sweeney**, **Scott Cassidy**, **Brian Sikorski** and **Jon Adkins** and LHP **Alan Embree** have provided dependable depth and versatility. ... 1B **Adrian Gonzalez** has regained his stroke in the past month and is driving balls to all fields with surprising power. He also continues to dazzle with his glove. **KEEP AN EYE ON:** RHP **Woody Williams** was in a groove before tearing his calf muscle last month, but expect him to reclaim his rhythm when he returns to the rotation. Vocal in the clubhouse, Williams, 39, counsels young pitchers and will be a positive force down the stretch. —Lyle Spencer

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS

Expect RHP **Matt Morris** to get more victories after a stretch of weak run support. He can be dominant and is throwing better than his 4.81 ERA indicates. ... LHP **Steve Kline**'s work has been exceptional thanks to a tightly wound slider that has regained its bite. Still, the team will be careful not to overwork Kline, who had pitched in 28 games at the start of the week. ... 3B **Pedro Feliz** has been more patient at the plate this season; that has helped him become a catalyst for an inconsistent offense.

KEEP AN EYE ON: **Eleuterio Alfonzo**, the backup catcher with **Mike Matheny** on the D.L. (concussion), is batting close to .270 and has decent power. Alfonzo, 27, who has 10 years of minor league experience, is blossoming offensively and learning how to handle the starters. He'll move back to Class AAA when Matheny returns, but his potential appears good. —Rich Draper

INSIDER DAVE D'ALESSANDRO



**It's time to use the D-League the way it should be used:
as a shield for exploited kids.**

NBA faces a developing problem

David Stern issued his annual harangue last week about how special interests—AAU types, street agents, shoe companies, et al.—are stunting the growth of young American players, and he employed a device easily recognizable to any student of rhetoric.

He stated the problem, blamed somebody else and warned that the NBA, nanny state that it is, is going to have to take measures to repair a situation it never has shown any practical interest in resolving.

Take the summit the league had last winter in Chicago and the follow-up meeting this spring. The issue of how we exploit our amateur athletes was addressed—the get-together prominently featured officials from Nike (stop laughing), AAU reps, Mike Krzyzewski, Dean Smith, George Raveling and Myles Brand.

Nothing came of it because everyone at the meeting grotesquely benefits from the

current system: Coach K (represented by David Falk) and Raveling are Nike guys, and most NBA G.M.s regard Brand, the president of the NCAA, as an empty suit whose only aim is to keep the green flowing to universities. Allowing that bunch to fix the problem would be like Dick Cheney letting the CEO of ExxonMobil formulate the national energy policy.

Stern knows that but won't admit it. He's better at public rebukes, with the names conspicuously omitted: "American players and their development are going to go through a renaissance. If we have to fuel it ourselves, OK. Maybe we're viewing it as our obligation to become involved in something we never wanted to touch because it was both unpleasant and possibly deleterious to their academic health."

But now, the league must take the Why Johnny Can't Read a Playbook issue seriously. "The only solution,"

according to one exec who is too blunt for the league to hear him, "is for us to use the baseball model."

Makes sense. The NBA already has a developmental league; now it must stretch the league to exceed the grasp of the street agents. Try this formula: Make all high school players eligible for a developmental draft. If a player elects to sign with a minor league team, he forfeits two years of college eligibility but is free to return to school if his pro aspirations do not work out.

Or, if he is in college but wishes to sign with a pro team, he first has to commit two years to school. After two years, he can enter the regular draft without

penalty, and teams have 11 months to sign him. The only things left to work out are how many picks each team would get per year as well as the call-up and trade eligibility mechanisms.

The snag is money. Team revenues are growing at a low single-digit rate and can't keep up with the players' annual 10.5 percent salary hikes. But if Stern is serious about building a better mousetrap to keep out the special interests, he'll find a way to invest in his league's future—and in the future of the kids he allows others to exploit.

SN

Dave D'Alessandro is the NBA writer for *The Star-Ledger* of Newark, N.J.

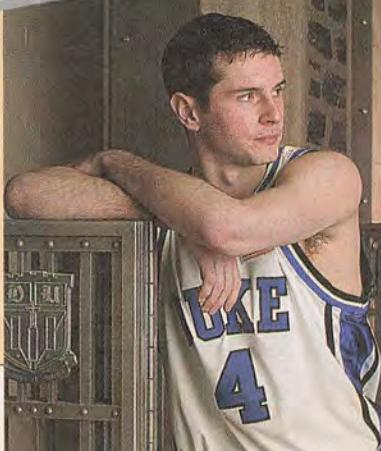
BLOG ALERT

When you have the No. 1 pick and a ton of cap space, you have options.

How will that DWI arrest affect Duke SG J.J. Redick's draft status? It depends on whom you consult. Some believe the incident could drop Redick out of the lottery, but most G.M.s believe he won't get past Houston at No. 8—the Rockets badly need shooters to take pressure off their two studs, and he purportedly had a great workout in Houston. > Unusual recruitment methods employed by the Bulls: The brass took Texas PF LaMarcus Aldridge to dinner last week, and for the first 10 minutes all coach Scott Skiles did was stare at the kid. "I was kind of scared," Aldridge says. > Leftover news from the Orlando predraft camp: The names heard most in trade discussions: PF Kenyon Martin, SG Allen Iverson,

INSIDE DISH

Redick's arrest probably won't cost him a lottery ticket.



C Jamaal Magloire, SF Corey Maggette, PG Brevin Knight and everybody on Portland's roster. > How much has Michael Jordan invested in the Bobcats to become their new managing partner? The Charlotte Observer, citing industry sources, estimates his ante to be between \$10 million and \$20 million. In other words, Bob Johnson, who paid \$350 million for the team, still is king of the castle. > Rockets C Yao Ming has taken the protective boot off his broken left foot, and X-rays show the screw holding the bones in place is doing its job. Yao is scheduled to return to China by the end of this week with his personal trainer, but it's too early to tell whether he'll be ready to play in the World Championships, which start August 19.

INSIDER DAN POMPEI

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The Patriots may be a horse of a different color these days, but their coach still is a whiz of a Wiz if ever a Wiz there was.

The Great and Powerful Os has spoken

Enough e-mailers have told me I need a brain, so I'm taking a trip down the yellow brick road to see the Wonderful Wizard of Os (and Xs). Surely, he can help me.

As I approach the Emerald City gates at Gillette Stadium, I am stopped.

Guardian of the Emerald City gates:

Orders are nobody can see the Great Os! Not nobody, not no how!

Me: But I brought bagels!

Guardian: Why didn't you say so? Any cream cheese? But before you see the Wizard, we have to shave your back hair, manicure your disgusting toenails and do something about that wrinkled freebie golf shirt.

Me: If you do that, no one will know I'm a sportswriter. But anything to see the mighty Wizard.

After I spruce up, the doors to the Wizard's chamber open. In front of me is a huge floating head on a projection screen usually used for game tape.

Wizard of Os: I am Os, the Great and Powerful. You have the effrontery to ask for a brain?

Me: Y-y-y-yes, sir. See, the citizens of the merry old land of Os aren't so merry. You've lost Adam Vinatieri, Willie McGinest, David Givens and Eric Mangini, and the Wicked Witch of South Florida is gathering an intimidating army of flying monkeys. It's a jungle out there with Dolphins and Bills and Jets! Oh my!

Wizard of Os: You are talking to a man who has laughed in the face of death, sneered at doom and chuckled at catastrophe.

Me (shaking and cowering):

I should have known better than to question the great Os.

Wizard of Os: Stop sniveling.

Me: Yes, Your Honor. I mean Your Excellency. I mean Your Wizardry. Why didn't you re-sign Vinatieri?

Wizard of Os: DO NOT LOOK BEHIND THE CURTAIN!

Me: OK, well, how will you replace Vinatieri? He last was seen chanting, "There's no place like dome. There's no

place like dome."

Wizard of Os: Either with rookie Stephen Gostkowski or Martin Gramatica. I wouldn't say Gostkowski is a better kicker than Adam, but he has good leg strength. If Gramatica is healthy, he can be accurate, and he has had a lot of big kicks in his career.

Me: Will this affect the way the Wizard strategizes on Sundays?

Wizard of Os: I don't think it can affect you. Nobody is going to make them all, but you have to have the confidence that your guy can do the job.

Me: If you knew your season would come down to a couple of key kicks, would it be worth it to overpay a kicker you had complete confidence in?

Wizard of Os: Of course. Where are you from, Kansas or something?

Me: OK, let's change the subject. McGinest has played outside linebacker like a twister for 11 years. Will losing him force Mike Vrabel back outside?

Wizard of Os: He probably is more natural outside. We'll teach him inside and outside linebacker, and how we use him

Belichick has laughed in the face of death, sneered at doom, chuckled at catastrophe—and won three Super Bowls.



ILLUSTRATION BY JACK KRUYNE / SN

S BLOG ALERT

LThe Colts' running game will be as productive without James as long as there's fear of Manning throwing the ball around at will.

We know the Colts lost their Edge, but has Vinnie Iyer lost his? Give him a holler at sportingnews.com.

will depend on how it goes with the other players.

Me: Matt Cassel hasn't started a game since high school. Can he replace the beloved leader of the Lollipop Guild, Doug Flutie, as your No. 2 quarterback?

Wizard of Os: I think he has a chance. He showed me some things against Miami last year.

Me: It seems like you've been selectively spending on free agents, oh Mighty One.

Wizard of Os: DO NOT AROUSE THE WRATH OF THE GREAT AND POWERFUL OS! We have spent to the cap every year. And we have a plan we are following. When you sign Tom Brady or Richard Seymour, it still is veteran money—call it what you want.

Me: Your running backs last season started to look like tin men after a downpour. Is first-round pick Laurence Maroney going to play a lot?

Wizard of Os: I wouldn't rule it out. I wouldn't count out Corey Dillon, either. I think Maroney gives us an element of speed. The other backs are up there in age, so we needed a young back we can work with.

Me: Pardon me, Your Wizardry, but after all this time I still feel like a nincompoop. What about my brain?

Wizard of Os: The Beneficent Os has every intention of granting your request. But first you must prove yourself worthy by performing a very small task. Return to me with the playbook of the Wicked Witch of South Florida. Then we'll really talk. **SN**

Based loosely on a conversation with Patriots coach Bill Belichick.

speedreads

My first reaction on Ben Roethlisberger is I'm happy he's alive. My second reaction is if he gets back on a motorcycle, he's out of his mind. The issue isn't about wearing a helmet; it's about riding a motorcycle. If Roethlisberger gets back on, he hasn't learned anything.

With left guard Steve Hutchinson gone, look for the Seahawks to become a more balanced left/right running team.

One of the best Week 1 games will be Colts at Giants. This will be the first chance to see Peyton Manning beat up his little brother—or to see Eli beat up his big brother. I'm not sure which yet.

Some Rams insiders believe RB **Marshall Faulk** is close to announcing his retirement. Faulk has been slow to recover from offseason surgery on both knees, and his communication with new head coach

Scott Linehan hasn't been the best. The Rams strongly considered taking a running back in the draft but didn't, and that decision may haunt them. If Faulk retires, **Steven Jackson**,

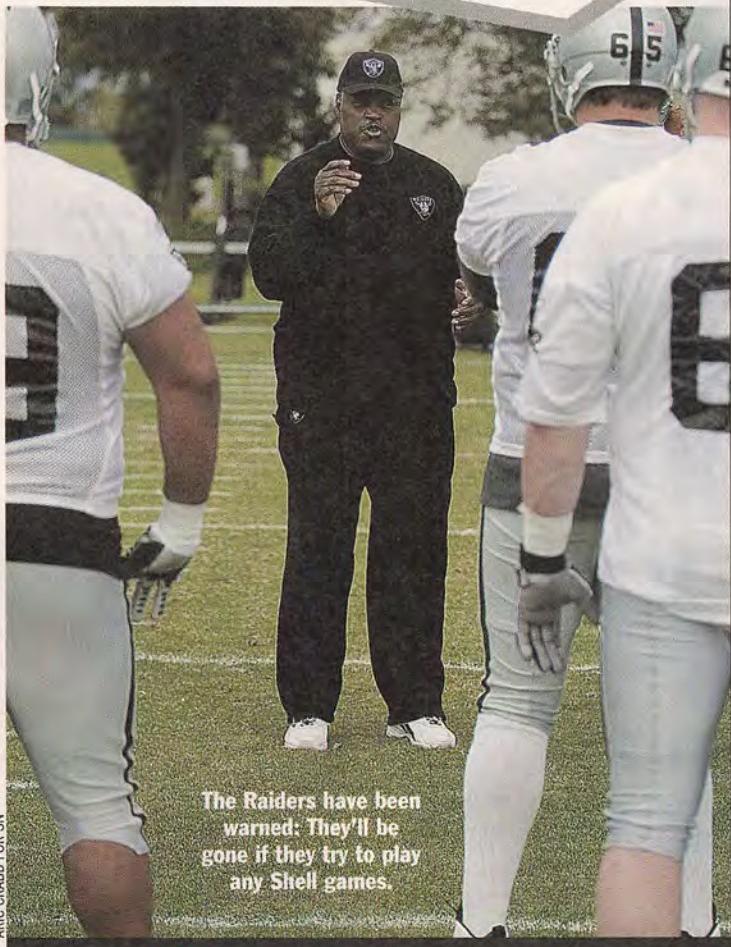
Tony Fisher and a bunch of obscure players will man the position. ➤ There's more excitement in Giants camp about second-round pick **WR Sinorice Moss** than about first-round pick

DE Mathias Kiwanuka. The players talk about Moss as if he were the No. 1 selection, and they expect him to have a huge impact this season. ➤ Not every Eagles player was thrilled to see RG **Shawn Andrews** get a \$10 million signing bonus and a seven-year contract extension that goes through 2015. Some wondered why the team felt the need to address Andrews, who had three years left on his original contract, when

DBs **Brian Dawson**, **Michael Lewis** and **Roderick Hood** each has one year left. ➤ Some scouts were stunned when the Browns spent a fourth-round pick on Miami LB **Leon Williams**. "He wasn't even a starter," one veteran AFC

personnel man says, "and he didn't have the instincts to start." The Browns disagree. They like Williams' size (6-2, 238) and athleticism. He will go into training camp as the top candidate to back up ILB **Andra Davis**, and the team believes it can coach Williams to a higher level. ➤ Rookie S **Marcus Hudson** has caught the attention of 49ers coaches by repeatedly demonstrating instinctive playmaking abilities in noncontact practices. In one red zone drill, Hudson intercepted QB **Alex Smith** twice and knocked down another pass at the goal line. Hudson, who is fast, athletic and has good size, eventually could challenge

>INSIDE DISH



The Raiders have been warned: They'll be gone if they try to play any Shell games.

ARIC CRABB FOR SN

Raiders coach **Art Shell** is cognizant of the disrespect some players showed his predecessors, **Norv Turner** and **Bill Callahan**. Shell has made it clear such behavior won't be tolerated on his watch. To prove it, he called out a few players and told them they won't be around if they undermine his authority or threaten team unity.

for playing time at free safety, where the 49ers don't have an established starter. ➤ Ravens president **Dick Cass** recently said the window of opportunity for the team could close after two more seasons. Cass indicated the team might have to purge some good veteran players, similar to what it did after the 2001 season when several top players were forced to retire or were not re-signed because of salary cap concerns. Among the players who could be swept out in two years are MLB **Ray Lewis**, QB **Steve McNair**, WR **Derrick Mason**, CB **Samari Rolle**, DE **Trevor Pryce** and CB **Chris McAlister**. —SN correspondents

NFL INSIDE THE AFC

UNIT ANALYSIS Offensive tackles



A LT Levi Jones and RT Willie Anderson are skilled as run blockers and pass protectors.



B+ LT Tarik Glenn is a two-time Pro Bowler. RT Ryan Diem needs to bounce back.



B+ LT Willie Roaf remains one of the best. Can Kyle Turley solidify the right side?



B LT Matt Lepsis relies on good footwork. RT George Foster must be more consistent.



B LT Khalid Barnes is a cornerstone. RT Maurice Williams needs to rebound.



B The Pats get solid work from Matt Light, Nick Kaczur and Brandon Gorin.



B LT Marvel Smith is reliable. RT Max Starks needs to play with more tenacity.



B- RT Ryan Tucker is a mauler. LT Kevin Shaffer plays with a mean streak.



C+ LT Jonathan Ogden is a force, but the right side is so-so and there's no depth.



C+ LT D'Brickashaw Ferguson will be special in time. RT Adrian Jones can be solid.



C+ Stabilizing the position may take time; both tackles started at other spots in '05.



C LT Mike Gandy is solid but hardly an elite talent. RT Jason Peters is raw.



C LT L.J. Shelton was added, but is he an upgrade over Damion McIntosh?



C RT Shane Olivea is coming off a down year. LT Roman Oben's injury clouds things.



C Michael Roos takes over on the left side. The right side is a big question mark.



C Questions still surround LT Seth Wand, who is trying to re-enter the starting lineup.

BENGALS DT Matthias Askew spent 2005 in the coaches' doghouse because he had nagging injuries and a questionable attitude. But he is having an impressive offseason. Askew has reshaped his body with strength and flexibility training. ... **BROWNS** QB Charlie Frye has shown improved arm strength this offseason. The trade of Trent Dilfer has allowed Frye—and his teammates—to get comfortable with his being the No. 1 guy. ... WR Kelly Campbell was a big-play target for QB Daunte Culpepper in Minnesota and could be again with the **DOLPHINS**. Campbell, who missed last season, also is willing to go over the middle. ... The **COLTS** tied up DE Robert Mathis through 2011. He may be a situational player and is one of the smaller ends in the league, but Mathis (6-2, 235) has outstanding speed, is an elite pass rusher and excels at forcing fumbles. ... Another undersized end, rookie **Elvis Dumervil** (5-11, 258) played every position on the line at the **BRONCOS'** recent workouts. He believes his size aids in his leverage against bigger tackles, who have to bend down to engage him off the ball. His quickness is difficult for interior



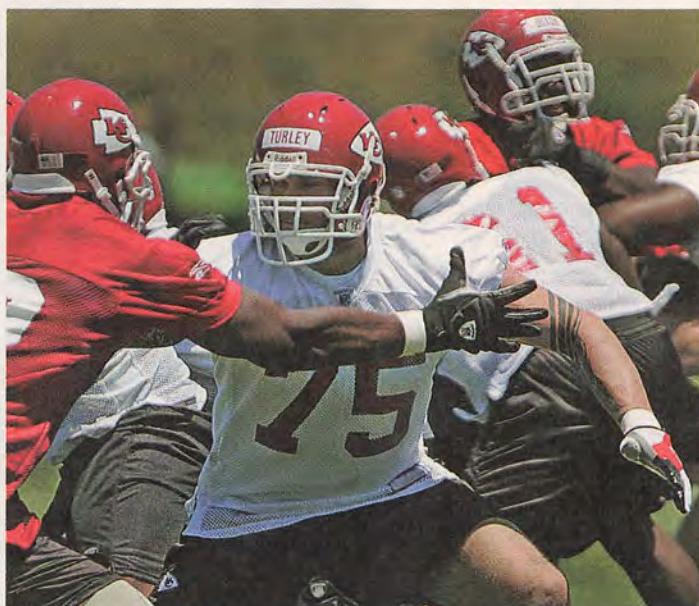
Frye

Building blockers

TEs Erron Kinney, Ben Troupe and Bo Scaife combined to catch 147 passes in 2005, but the Titans want them to improve their run blocking. New tight ends coach John Zernhelt has a background coaching offensive linemen, and he has Kinney, Troupe and Scaife working some with the tackles so they get a better feel for the ground game.

offseason program. ... The **RAVENS** need to look into the training regimen of WR Mark Clayton, who has been plagued by hamstring injuries. He has missed extensive time at various camps this offseason. The team needs him to add a big-play element to the passing game. ... **Dan Klecko** can't find his niche with the **PATRIOTS**. He is too small (6-1, 290) to play in a 3-4 front and too bulky to thrive at linebacker, which is where he is working now. Because he has a great attitude and makes plays on special teams, Klecko has some value. But it seems New England's scheme isn't a good fit for him. ... Rookie SS Michael Huff has been everything the **RAIDERS** had hoped he would be. He has a strong on-field presence, will stick his nose into the pile and shows the ability to be a good leader. ... **STEELERS** CB Ike Taylor is fast, athletic and displays great anticipation for the ball. He is entering the final year of his contract and could command big money. Whether he returns will depend partly on the development of CB Ricardo Colclough. ... The **JAGUARS**

expect rookie Clint Ingram to take a run at the starting weakside linebacker job in training camp, though Nick Greisen has the job for now. Greisen lacks speed and rarely made big plays with the Giants, but he is smart and a sure tackler. Ingram has the speed and ability to produce turnovers but still is learning the scheme. ... WR Derrick Lewis, who is coming off a 1,427-yard season in the Arena Football League, could become the **TEXANS'** No. 4 wideout. He has good speed, knows how to beat man coverage and runs solid routes. ... NT Sione Pouha was a washout as a rookie largely because he didn't play with enough fire. If he can rev it up a bit, he could crack the **JETS'** line rotation. Pouha, who is powerful at the point of attack, split reps with Dewayne Robertson in minicamp. ... Scott Mruzczkowski can fill any spot on the **CHARGERS'** offensive line. He played guard and center in college and has been impressive at right tackle. He works hard and is strong and agile.



ALLISON LONG / THE KANSAS CITY STAR / AP

The 'ifs' are bigger than he is

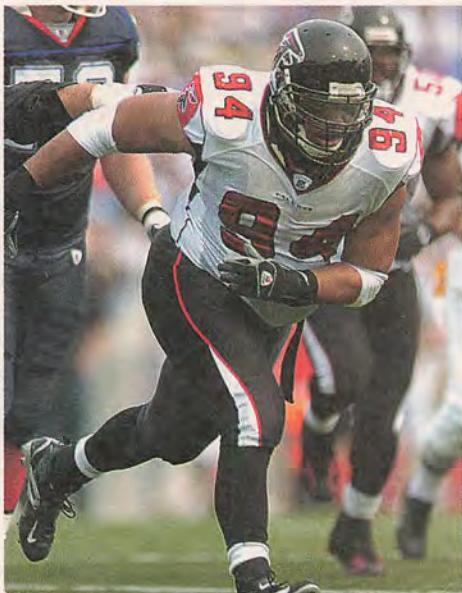
The Chiefs signed RT Kyle Turley, who has a good chance to start because incumbent John Welbourn says he will retire. Turley is more athletic and skilled than Welbourn, but he has some significant issues to overcome: He must shake off two years of rust and show he can play effectively at less than 300 pounds. Turley needs to stay light because of his balky back, which halted his career after the 2003 season.

CORRESPONDENTS: Baltimore, Mike Preston; Buffalo, Allen Wilson; Cincinnati, Chick Ludwig; Cleveland, Steve Doerschuk; Denver, Lee Rasizer; Houston, Megan Manfull; Indianapolis, Mike Chappell; Jacksonville, Bart Hubbuch; Kansas City, Adam Teicher; Miami, Jason Cole; New England, Tom Curran; New York, Rich Cimini; Oakland, Steve Corkran; Pittsburgh, Gerry Dulac; San Diego, Kevin Ace; Tennessee, Jim Wyatt.

INSIDE THE NFC

LB Hunter Hillenmeyer has been taking advantage of Pro Bowl SLB Lance Briggs' absence from the **BROWNS'** voluntary offseason program and is gaining experience in the nickel defense. Hillenmeyer has focused on improving in space, which had been a weakness. ... RT Oliver Ross must play better than he did last season, his first with the **CARDINALS**.

He didn't fare well against speed rushers, and the team's emphasis on the passing game detracted from what Ross does best: run block. ... TE Jermaine Wiggins has lost at least 15 pounds during the **VIKINGS'** offseason conditioning program. Not only will that ingratiate him to the new coaching staff, it will help him move more quickly to avoid tacklers. ... Once an area of concern, linebacker depth has become one of the **BUCANEERS'** greatest strengths. In addition to Jamie Winborn and Barrett Ruud, the team is high on Wesly Mallard, who has good instincts and range, and Charles Bennett, who drops into coverage well. ... Though his status as a starter isn't completely solid, **LIONS** LCB Fernando Bryant has responded well to the challenge from the team's younger defensive backs. Coming off shoulder surgery, he needs to reassert himself as a solid player in coverage.



DAVID DUROCHIK FOR SN

Seems that Lavalais never met a Ring Ding he didn't like ... and it could land the big fella on the bench.

All the tools, less pain

Another year removed from a stinger injury that cut short his promising 2004 rookie season, Giants SS Gibril Wilson is expected to regain his aggressiveness this year. He has the temperament, speed and hands to be a playmaker, but last season he wasn't nearly the big hitter he had been before the injury. Playing next to FS Will Demps, another speedy and aggressive player, will help Wilson.

SS Omar Stoutmire has impressed **SAINTS** coaches enough to earn a starting job for now. What he lacks in speed, he makes up for by being in the right place at the right time. ... **49ERS'** rookie Delanie Walker is showing promise making the conversion from wide receiver to F-back, a backfield player who typically goes in motion to set up a mismatch or produce a lead block. He must become more consistent as an open-field blocker. ... Because **Chad Lavalais** has struggled with conditioning, NT Darrell Shropshire might open camp as the **FALCONS'** starter. A seventh-round pick in 2005, Shropshire looks raw at times but shows impressive strength and endurance. ... DT Kenderick Allen is making a push to get into the **PACKERS'** interior line rotation. He reported to the first minicamp at 341 pounds but has lost 16 since and has showed great power at the point of attack. ... Despite the **SEAHAWKS'** depth at wide receiver, rookie seventh-round pick Ben Obomanu has a chance to make the roster and get playing time. He turned heads during a recent minicamp by catching the ball well and showing run-after-the-catch ability. ... The **COWBOYS** need Thomas Johnson or rookie Montavious Stanley to emerge as an adequate backup for NT Jason Ferguson, who can't play every snap given the physical nature of the position. Johnson and Stanley have good size, so the player with the better technique is likely to win the job. ... **PANTHERS'** FB Nick Goings (6-0, 225) lacks the size to be



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

With his injury behind him, Wilson is ready to inflict some punishment.

UNIT ANALYSIS

Offensive tackles

A- LT Chad Clifton and RT Mark Tauscher keep Brett Favre from taking many shots.

A- LT Orlando Pace remains one of the game's best. RT Alex Barron is getting there.

A- LT Walter Jones is the best lineman on the planet. RT Sean Locklear played well in '05.

B+ LT Chris Samuels and RT Jon Jansen are well above average. Depth is needed.

B Once a problem spot, left tackle has been stabilized by John Tait. RT Fred Miller is solid.

B LT Bryant McKinnie is one of the NFL's top 10 tackles. RT Marcus Johnson is a project.

B Jon Runyan is set on the right side. LT Tra Thomas must stay healthy.

B- LT Luke Petitgout and RT Kareem McKenzie are powerful run blockers.

C+ RT Jordan Gross has the potential to be outstanding. LT Travelle Wharton is ordinary.

C LT Leonard Davis is solid but unspectacular. RT Oliver Ross was disappointing in '05.

C LT Wayne Gandy needs more speed on cut blocks. RT Todd Weiner needs more endurance.

C For Dallas to make a deep playoff run, LT Flozell Adams must return to Pro Bowl form.

C LT Jeff Backus must rebound from a subpar '05. RT Rex Tucker is a better fit at guard.

C LT Jonas Jennings is coming off a shoulder injury. Right tackle remains unsettled.

C The lack of an exceptional tackle holds back the offense.

C- There is talent but little experience. Jammal Brown must adjust to the left side.



BOB LEVERONE / SN

JOB INSECURITY

A starter for the Eagles the past two seasons, SLB Dhani Jones could be in jeopardy of losing his job. The team liked his speed when it signed him as a free agent in 2004, but he has to start using it to make a play now and then. Jones hasn't shown good coverage skills or the ability to get to the quarterback as a blitzer.

CORRESPONDENTS: Arizona, Kent Somers; Atlanta, George Henry; Carolina, Pat Yasinskas; Chicago, Brad Biggs; Dallas, Jean-Jacques Taylor; Detroit, Tom Kowalski; Green Bay, Tom Silverstein; Minnesota, Kevin Seifert; New Orleans, Mike Triplett; New York, Ralph Vacchiano; Philadelphia, Mark Eckel; St. Louis, Jim Thomas; San Francisco, Dennis Georgatos; Seattle, Clare Farnsworth; Tampa Bay, Roy Cummings; Washington, Paul Woody.



BRIAN BALDINGER

Wild side is part of what makes Roethlisberger a winner

If I ran the Steelers, I'd make sure Ben Roethlisberger's next contract included language prohibiting him from riding a motorcycle. And hang gliding. And surfing, rock climbing and whatever else I deemed dangerous. But I would be taking a risk—just like Ben took a risk when he rode his Suzuki without a helmet—because I might be cutting the heart out of my most important player.

I fully understand those who say Roethlisberger was foolish to ride without a helmet—or to ride a motorcycle at all. But it's that daredevil approach to life that makes Ben tick, and messing with that could be a mistake.

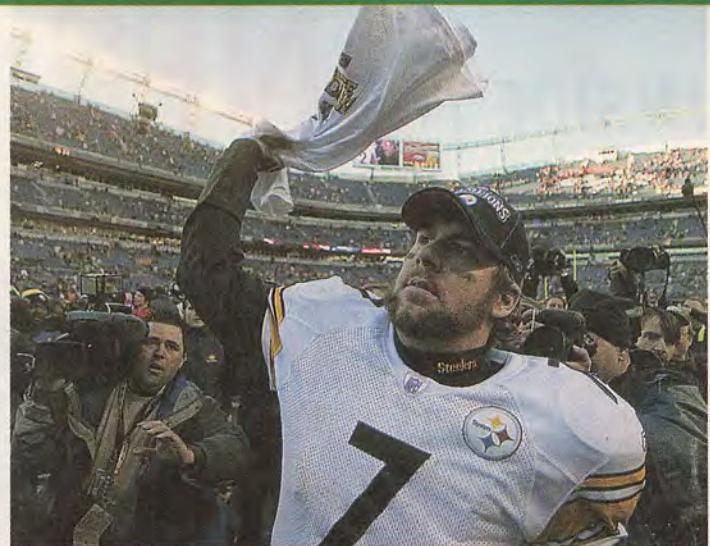
Some quarterbacks certainly look the part. They can throw a ball through a tire, read defenses, move in the pocket, the whole bit. But what they lack is the ability to

react, the self-confidence and spontaneity to make the right play at the right time. They're stiff and robotic, and they have names like Kyle Boller and Joey Harrington.

That's not Roethlisberger. He competes with a swagger, a freeness that allows him to play virtually error-free football in the postseason while Dwight Freeney and Robert Mathis nip at his heels. That swagger is confidence ... confidence to ride fast without a helmet, confidence to walk into the RCA Dome and carve up the Colts.

When Ben tells coach Bill Cowher he appreciates the concern but he's still going to ride, he's expressing the same mentality that makes him a winning quarterback. Ben is fearless. You can't harness him off the field and expect him to be unaffected on the field.

Roethlisberger isn't the only



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

No team wants its franchise quarterback to be reckless, but asking players such as Roethlisberger to hold back off the field also is a risk.

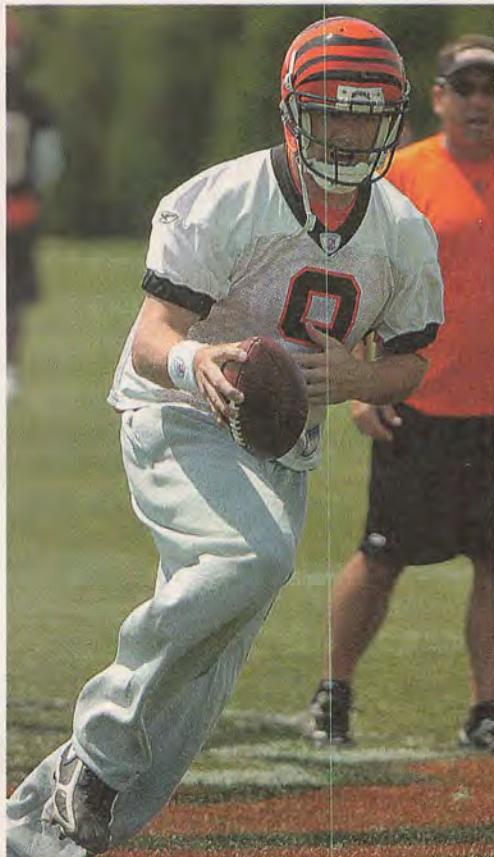
player in the NFL like this. Plenty of guys, from Brett Favre on down, have that gunslinger mentality. And most of them are pretty darned good players. My gosh, it's the same mind-set that drives Tiger Woods to bungee jump 440 feet from a cable car in New Zealand. Was that wise? Probably not, but it's who he is.

It kills me to see a player of

Roethlisberger's caliber get hurt. It's not just the Steelers who need him; the league does. So, yeah, if it were up to me, I'd get it in writing that Ben couldn't engage in risky activities. I'd have to, so I could protect my investment in him. But he'd probably go out and do the stuff anyway. And in the end, I probably wouldn't mind.



Brian Baldinger, an offensive lineman for 12 NFL seasons, is a regular contributor to Sporting News Radio. Listen online at radio.sportingnews.com.



NO SEASON LIKE THE OFFSEASON

Who says getting ready for the season has to be tough? These guys are way ahead of the curve.

■ It hasn't taken long for Seahawks QB **Matt Hasselbeck** and WR **Nate Burleson**, a free-agent acquisition, to develop a good rapport. The two were clicking on short, intermediate and even deep routes in minicamp last week, and no one was having much luck covering Burleson, who used his quickness to find open spots in zone coverage. His nice stutter and hesitation moves helped him get past defenders on the deep routes.

■ Bengals QB **Carson Palmer** took another step in his rehabilitation when he faced a defense for the first time since having surgery on his left knee. He ran a 2-minute drill in 11-on-11 practice at minicamp. Palmer says he felt rusty and off-balance and he wasn't as fluid in his five-step drops as he would have liked, but he showed excellent zip on his passes. The mere fact Palmer's knee held up well strengthens his belief that he'll start the team's September 10 opener at Kansas City. The Bengals' backups are journeymen **Anthony Wright** and **Doug Johnson**.

■ **Will Witherspoon** looks at home as the middle linebacker in the Rams' revamped defense. The scheme still is being installed, but no matter what its final makeup is Witherspoon will be an every-down player. His speed and agility make him an asset in coverage, and he has sideline-to-sideline range.

TONY TRIBBLE / AP

Team analysis out the wazoo

When previewing the 2006 season, nothing matters more than team analysis. Will

your team rise to the top? Or should you start peeking at 2007 draft prospects? We break down the entire league—with

fearless predictions, a league overview, fantasy analysis and the best team previews you'll find anywhere—in the 2006 Pro Football yearbook, which went on sale Tuesday. Get your copy at newsstands, or order by phone at 800-825-8508 or online at sportingnews.com/books/football.



INSIDER MATT HAYES

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Just win, baby. On and off the field.

For Coker, recruiting is a disarming experience

t happened again last week. And sure enough, it's Larry Coker's fault.

Daniel Stegall followed Pat Devlin, who followed Derek Shaw, who started this whole mess that somehow has made a coach who is averaging 10 wins a season at Miami look like a bumbling, blundering fool.

All because an 18-year-old high school kid had an 11th-hour change of heart.

"Thirteenth-hour," Coker says.

And this is the problem with coaching these days. It's not enough to win on the field; your guy in the headset has to win off it, too. College football creates such passion and is so all-consuming that something has to fill those eight long, dreary months of offseason.

That something is recruiting. Let's reintroduce Shaw, Devlin and Stegall—three quarterback recruits who committed to Miami over the past two seasons yet never experienced the sun and fun at The U. Shaw pulled out of



BOB LEVERONE / SN

Coker's success has been undermined by the whims of a few fresh-faced gunslingers.

his commitment late in the process last year and signed with Arizona State. Devlin backed out in February and signed with Penn State. Then there's Stegall, who informed Coker last week that he would play professional baseball instead of enrolling at Miami.

Three quarterbacks, three losses and a boatload of wacko fans who blame Coker and point

to this disturbing coincidence as another example of Miami's plummet from the nation's elite. Forget that Shaw since has left Arizona State and that Devlin won't see the field until 2008 if former hotshot recruit Anthony Morelli plays to his potential at Penn State. Or that Stegall simply was a filler recruit, an arm Miami had to have after Devlin changed his mind.

Those three recruiting "losses" have left Miami with two scholarship quarterbacks, and heaven help the Canes if those two are injured. Because, of course, most teams can forge ahead with a

championship run if they lose *both* quarterbacks. To say nothing of the fact that, for all we know, Shaw, Devlin and Stegall could've been stiffs at Miami.

Let me refresh your noggin with this jewel from noted recruiting expert Max Emfinger:

Long ago, mighty Max claimed Emmitt Smith was a "plugger" and wouldn't be a productive college back.

Five years ago, Brent Rawls was considered by many a better quarterback prospect than a skinny kid from Santa Ana, Calif., named Matt Leinart. Rawls signed with Oklahoma and never was heard from again. Leinart became the best college quarterback ever.

"You can go down a list of guys who never made it," Coker says.

The problem is, Coker can't seem to get them to arrive. And this weird trend may not end. Next year around this same time, Coker will be sweating another quarterback recruit. He landed an early commitment for 2007 from Nick Fanuzzi, a dual-threat quarterback from San Antonio. Although Fanuzzi insists he will break the string of Miami commitments gone awry, he also is a talented baseball player and it's easy to see where things could be headed.

A 13th-hour change of heart. SN

BLOG ALERT
Terry Hoeppner really believes he can win. Bless his soul.

St. Tom Dienhart stops just short of issuing last rites to the Hoosiers at sportingnews.com.

Coach Ron Prince, who was considered Al Grobe's top recruiter at Virginia, wants Kansas State to become a program that can recruit nationally instead of relying heavily on junior colleges for skill and impact players. For a program in the middle of nowhere seeking quality exposure, marquee nonconference games are the next best thing to winning a conference championship. To that end, Prince has added home-and-home games against Louisville and UCLA and is a few formalities from adding a series with Miami. > Credit Wake Forest coach Jim Grobe for changing his philosophy in an effort to make QB Ben Mauk more comfortable in the passing game. A onetime megarecruit, Mauk has struggled in two seasons at Wake Forest, in



part because of his inability to operate within Grobe's I-formation offense. The Deacs will use more shotgun sets to simplify Mauk's reads and to limit sacks and interceptions. > Welcome to Major Applewhite's world. A year after overseeing the transition from the option to a West Coast scheme while he was the quarterbacks coach at Syracuse (and watching it fail miserably), Applewhite will be the offensive coordinator as Rice goes from the option to the spread. That transition, too, will fail. Initially, that is. Rice's three returning quarterbacks are option quarterbacks, which will give incoming freshman Pierre Beasley a chance to win the job. Beasley was a fallback recruit for many BCS schools but has a BCS arm and body.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

INSIDER MIKE DeCOURCY

decourcy@sportingnews.com



Garyland is not a state of euphoria right now, but neither is it a state of disaster.

Winners don't always win

If you filled a book with all of the basketball Gary Williams obviously has forgotten the past four years, it would weigh as much as a waterlogged *War and Peace*.

■ In 2002, his Maryland Terrapins won the NCAA championship.

■ In 2006, someone established a website domain: FireGaryWilliams.com.

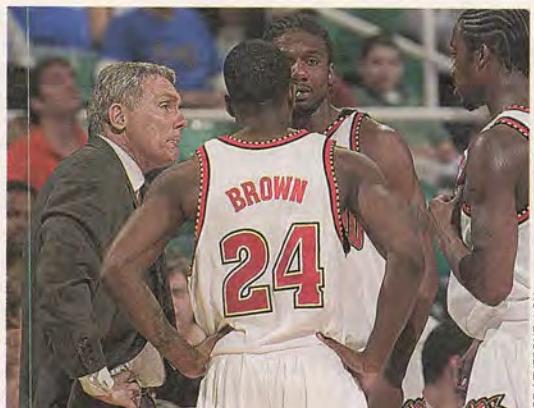
Starting in 1994, when Williams dragged the Terps out of probation hell with a Sweet 16 trip, Maryland made 11 consecutive NCAA Tournament appearances. Now the Terrapins are working on a different run: They have played in two straight NITs.

But just as Billy Donovan's brain did not turn to ice cream between his 2000 NCAA runner-up finish and this spring's national title, Williams is more the solution than the problem here. The experiences of both coaches demonstrate that impressing recruiting analysts doesn't always lead to wrecking opponents.

Sometimes, there is a Juan Dixon or Joakim Noah who blossoms. Sometimes, there is a John Gilchrist or Anthony Roberson who combusts.

"What people should understand: When players get to college, some don't work as hard and some really work hard," Williams says.

Gilchrist was the principal agent in Maryland's 2004 ACC Tournament championship, but he imploded late the following season. Maryland's failure to line up an adequate replacement affected both years of its NCAA



BOB LEVERONE / SN

The Terrapins have hit a bit of a rough patch, but Williams still knows what he's doing—honest.

Tournament drought.

Because everyone in the ACC takes basketball extremely seriously and the league has grown from nine teams to a dozen the past couple of seasons, the margin for error is thinner in this conference than any other. So things have to go only a little wrong to end up in disaster.

The interesting part of the Maryland situation is that winning the national title helped lead to the signing of more highly regarded recruits than before.

Forwards Nik Caner-Medley and Ekene Ibekwe were coveted prospects. Forward Travis Garrison and guard Mike Jones were McDonald's All-Americans. All four players, however, were flawed, and their issues were

exacerbated by the absence of a point guard who could accentuate their strengths and forge a sense of togetherness.

The guard situation likely will be much better this season thanks to a couple of freshmen. Williams believes Eric Hayes, the son of a coach, has the knowledge to run a team and that Greivis Vasquez can push him for the job. If

they handle the point, versatile D.J. Strawberry can move to small forward—replacing the departed Caner-Medley, a scorer who generally was out of sync with his teammates—and concentrate on becoming an elite defender. That would help improve a team that allowed an ACC-worst 73.5 points per game.

Forward James Gist has star-level ability and now will have plenty of opportunity to prove it. Ibekwe withdrew from the NBA draft after he was not invited to the Orlando predraft camp. Except at the point, there is plenty of experience.

"So I think we're going to be a good team," Williams says. "But you have to prove it."

Every day, it seems.

SN

BLOG ALERT

The sparkle Mustafa Shakur showed on the way to his senior year of high school has long since faded.

You want analysis that always shines? Read Mike DeCourcy's blogs at sportingnews.com.



Pitt coach Jamie Dixon filled his staff by hiring Mike Rice, who along with Orlando Antigua will replace departed assistants Barry Rohrissen and Joe Lombardi. Rice's

strongest contacts are in New Jersey, which already had become a recruiting hot spot because of the hiring of aggressive recruiters Bobby Gonzalez at Seton Hall and Fred Hill at Rutgers. Those programs are trying to catch up with Villanova, which drew All-American Randy Foye from Jersey and recently got a commitment from the state's top junior, SG Corey Stokes of Newark.

► C Spencer Hawes, PG Adrian Oliver and SF Quincy Pondexter are Washington's highest-profile recruits, but SF Phil Nelson also could contribute immediately.

Huskies coach Lorenzo Romar is checking with coaching friends for effective plays to free the 6-7 Nelson for 3-point jumpers.

► When Connecticut's freshmen show up for summer school, they won't feel alone. Next season's Huskies will include eight freshmen, plus PG A.J. Price, who has yet to play because of a brain hemorrhage and then a yearlong suspension.

► The NCAA's list of 15 secondary schools from which it no longer will accept transcripts does not include any prep schools that are known as basketball factories. The NCAA promises more schools will be identified later. ► A Kentucky alum was rejected in his attempt to buy an ad in the UK student newspaper that called for the firing of coach Tubby Smith. Seeing as how the university allowed this goof to earn two degrees, maybe basketball isn't Kentucky's biggest problem.

SQUEEZEPLAY



BY BRENDAN ROBERTS

Coors Field is playing more like Dodger Stadium. Dodger Stadium is playing more like Wrigley Field. And Wrigley Field is playing more like Kauffman Stadium.

Ballparks can make a big difference in fantasy strategy. Generally, park tendencies are consistent from year to year. So what in the name of RFK Stadium is going on this season? **Coors Field.** Runs and homers are down and games are being played in less than three hours, but I'm not sold on this as a lasting trend. Runs are down because the Rockies' pitching is better. When you compare home and road totals, Coors still rates as favorable in runs per game. Coors also was the top hitters park in Fantasy Source's preseason Power Poll each of the past three seasons. That trumps this season's small sample size.

Verdict: Still a hitters heaven.

Kauffman Stadium. The Royals' home was 25th in this year's preseason poll, but games are averaging more than 11 runs there this season. Perhaps the Royals' young players finally have adjusted to hitting there, as evidenced by home-road splits in team batting average. **Verdict:** Kauffman shouldn't be considered a hitters park, but it has slid into "neutral" territory.

Wrigley Field. Batting average is down, but I've seen this before at Wrigley, which was No. 8 in our poll. The place is unfriendly to hitters when the weather still is cold. Once summer hits, look out. **Verdict:** The



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

Hitters are making a splash in K.C., but outfielders don't need to play this deep.

hitters will prevail—starting about the time Derrek Lee returns.

Dodger Stadium. Normally a pitchers park (27th in our poll), it has been approaching favorable status in runs per game. **Verdict:** This seems fluky. The only increases have been in average and runs, and the park has been favorable for pitchers in the second half of each of the past three seasons.



Check out our Ballpark Power Poll at fantasybaseball.sportingnews.com/baseball/ballparks.

Closing time

Some former closers stand a better chance than others of returning to their old roles.

BE PATIENT WITH:

Jose Valverde, Diamondbacks. Of all the deposed closers, Valverde has the best chance to regain his spot. Manager Bob Melvin says so.

Francisco Cordero, Rangers. Akinori Otsuka remains Texas' ninth-inning pitcher of choice, but Cordero still is in the mix.

Fernando Rodney, Tigers. Todd Jones' recent struggles have Rodney on high alert.

FORGET ABOUT:

Eddie Guardado, Mariners. Youngster Rafael Soriano might get the call if J.J. Putz has trouble, but Putz has been great so far.

David Weathers, Reds. The team had been grooming Todd Coffey for the job. It's now his to keep.

Chris Reitsma, Braves; Keith Foulke, Red Sox.

Now that they're on the disabled list, you have even more reason to forget about them.

—Rob Hurnt



JAY DROWNS / SN

lifestyle ingo owdown

Three L's that help fantasy owners get W's

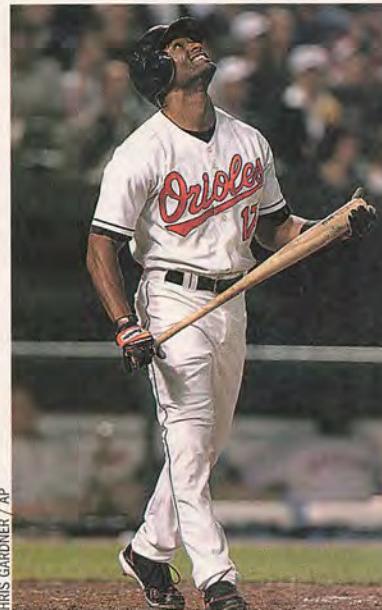
Lifestyle. There are plenty of ways to track your fantasy teams while you're on vacation now that most hotels offer free Internet access and wireless hot spots are more common. But chaining yourself to a desk is no way to spend your time off. Your team will survive a week of minimal maintenance, so go ahead and enjoy that sunset. Or, do what I do—vacation during the All-Star break.



JIM MCKNIGHT / AP

Lingo. Two-for-one special. We're not talking about your favorite taco order during one of those late-night food runs. If your fantasy team is hungry for more stats, one way to get them is by trading a stud for two near-elite players. It's a classic move that can help you gain in multiple categories.

Lowdown. Steals and saves are precious commodities in fantasy leagues, especially for owners who want to add them and move up in the standings. That's why, if you have a surplus, it's time to post an announcement on your league's home page that Corey Patterson is available to the highest bidder. —George Winkler



CHRIS GARDNER / AP

Trading Patterson now could be a steal of a deal.



ALBERT DICKSON / SN

BLOG ALERT

Doesn't it figure that less than three weeks after I trade for Albert Pujols, he goes on the D.L. for the first time in his career?

Even expert George Winkler has fantasy baseball gripes. Cut loose with yours at sportingnews.com.



DAVE KINDRED

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In Japan, a *hayabusa* is a falcon. In Pittsburgh, a Hayabusa is Big Ben's rocket ride to the operating room.

From zero to fender in a flash

At Extreme Powersports, a motorcycle dealership in Virginia, I ask the general manager, Ric Leary, "Would you sell me one of those?"

We're standing alongside a beautiful piece of machinery. It's a motorcycle, and not just any motorcycle. It's a Suzuki Hayabusa GSX1300R, the rocket that carried Ben Roethlisberger into that old lady's front fender.

It's black and it's silver and its name, *hayabusa*, is the Japanese word for *peregrine falcon*, a screaming-fast bird of prey. Even as the machine leans on its kickstand, it's so seductive that a guy draws in a breath, feels his heart throw in an extra beat. For \$12,000, it's mine, all mine, if only the man would sell it to me.

"I couldn't refuse to sell it," the general manager says. "But I'd try to talk you out of it."

"Why?"

"It's the wrong bike for somebody without real experience," he says.

"How so?"

"For one thing, it goes from 0 to 60 in under 3 seconds."

Goodgawdamighty.

I look at the speedometer. Its last number is 180.

There's a line after that, but that line is unnumbered, most likely because manufacturers, reacting to European concerns about speeds over 200 mph, have agreed to limit motorcycles to a top speed of 186. Why 186 instead of 166 or 196, who knows? Any such number is arbitrary because it's pretty much certain that a motorcycle accident at 156 will kill you just as dead as one at 186.

"What's the fastest you've ever done?" I ask Leary.

He looks sideways at me. "You quoting me?" "Probably."



PHILIP G. PAVELY / PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE REVIEW / AP

Young and invincible. Until your mangled motorcycle and a pool of your blood end up in the middle of the street.

"I don't do it anymore," he says. He's 61 years old and a grandfather. But he wasn't always 61. Used to be 16. Used to race motorcycles on ovals, leaning through corners with a knee a hair's breadth off the asphalt at 100 mph. "But I did 175 once."

"How'd that feel?"

He smiles big. "Things went by fast."

First time I rode a motorcycle, I loved it. Riding on dirt for an hour, I loved it. Then I got cocky. Started riding faster. Thought I could really do it—until I hit a bump and went airborne. There I did a bad thing. In a novice's instinctive act of holding on against fright, I pulled down on the grips. Which meant I twisted the throttle open.

When the rear wheel hit the ground, it was spinning so fast that the bike flew out from under me. Suddenly, I was in the air, laid out horizontally, looking up at the sky. Above me, I saw the bike. Luckily, we fell to earth in different places. For a month, I couldn't raise my left arm.

Out of fear and some modicum of common

sense, I never have ridden on the street. Too many horror stories. I knew a world champion rider who hit a guard rail and lost a leg. A family friend wearing no helmet bounced off U.S. 66 at 80 mph and wound up in the hospital with his head swollen grotesquely. "Like the moon," my wife said.

So what was Ben Roethlisberger thinking?

He was on a bike made to fly 186 mph, which is not to say he was speeding, but it's hard to go slow when you're riding a peregrine falcon. He was on a city street, and that's not to say he shouldn't have been, but old ladies in big cars don't always see motorcyclists. He wasn't wearing a helmet, which moved

Ric Leary to this piece of biker eloquence: "He's dumb as a box of rocks."

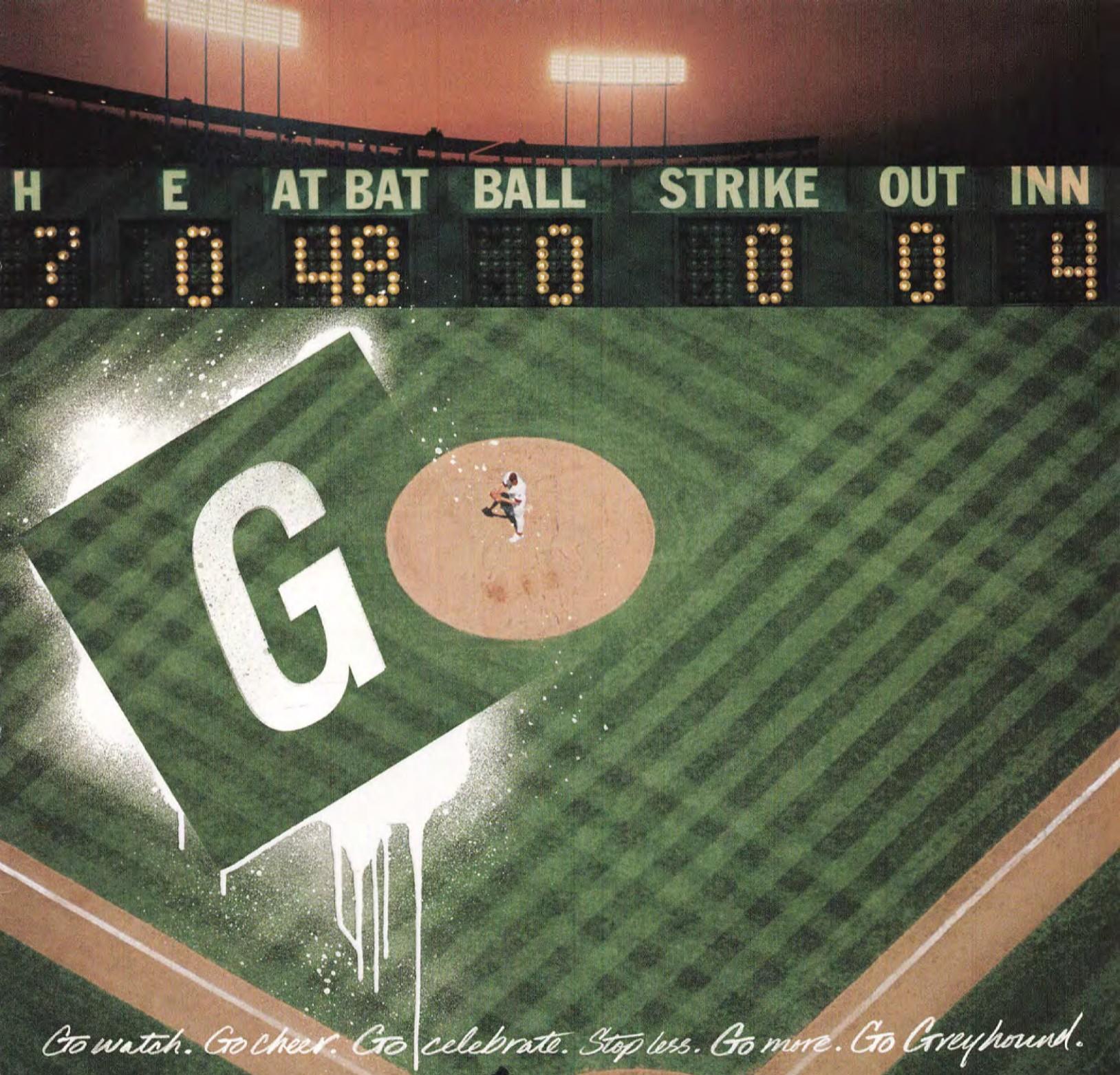
After the Hayabusa hit the car, Roethlisberger's head slammed against the car's windshield with such force it created an oval hole in the glass. By way of explaining the physics involved in the accident, it is important to know that the Hayabusa weighs 478 pounds and its engine generates 196 horsepower. But the number that may best explain what happened is 24.

Ben Roethlisberger is 24 years old. "At that age," Leary says, "we're all invincible. I know I was." In his first public statement after the smash-up, the Steelers quarterback implied as much by saying he "simply believed such an accident would not happen to me."

Now Roethlisberger knows better. Now, happily and luckily alive, he is recovering from surgery that put his face together again.

I didn't buy the Hayabusa. I dared not even ask for a test ride. I was afraid. Afraid that if I fired up that beautiful bird of prey, I might not stop until I got to Montana in a hurry.

SN



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